



by Madam Ru

It's Not Easy to be a Man After Travelling to the Future



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It's Not Easy to Be a Man After Travelling to the Future

– Crossing to the Future, it's Not Easy to Be a Man –

- Part 1 -

**-Author-
Madam Ru**

[ryuxenji (Qidian International)]

- STORY -

After dying from a strange terminal illness, Ling Lan was reborn into a world 10000 years into the future. Although she dearly wished she could just live a peaceful and uneventful life in her new healthy body, fate had other plans...

Forced to disguise herself as a boy just so she could inherit her deceased father's premium military benefits, Ling Lan's journey to adulthood was full of challenges. After much difficulty, she finally turned sixteen when she could drop the charade. But before she could grasp her newfound freedom to get married and start her own family, her resurrected father decided to go ahead and throw her into the Federation's top military boys' school.

With these twists of fate, Ling Lan had little choice but to walk further and further down a path of no return, one of cold and aloof dominance...

Chapter 1

Souls Actually Exist after Death?

Ling Lan was dead!

The moment she found herself hovering in the air looking down at the scene below her, she knew she was dead.

She found that she could see through solid walls. She saw her parents crying outside the Intensive Care Unit and the solemn expression on her younger brother's face. She also watched as he released a quiet sigh when no one was looking, as if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

Ling Lan was not angered by this. She knew very well that she had been a burden upon her family for a whole 24 years, almost ruining their household, which was not very wealthy to begin with. If it were not for the fact that her disease was so bizarre that it was considered worthy of research, resulting in government support for her medication, she might have already passed away a full ten years earlier due to the inability to afford treatment.

However, despite the delay, she still could not escape death in the end. The only surprise to her was that humans really did have souls.

She peered up into the distant darkness of the night sky, and wondered fantastically — perhaps there were beings such as Ox-Head and Horse-Face ¹ out in the world, or perhaps a Shinigami, like in the anime *Bleach*, who would suddenly spring out and drag her into the afterworld?

Abruptly, she laughed, mocking herself for reading all kinds of useless books and comics while she had been bedridden. Shinigami were from Japan — why would they show up in China? Ox-Head and Horse-Face were much more likely to appear, and perhaps even a small ghost dressed in traditional clothing?

"Idiot! There are no such things as human souls; this is your spiritual self. If you don't come back soon, you will really disperse into the air and become part of this world's energy." A childish voice rang out beside Ling Lan's ear, its tone frantic and concerned.

Before Ling Lan could respond, she felt herself drawn back by an overwhelming pull, and her consciousness started to fade. Right before she blacked out, she seemed to hear that same childish voice cry out joyfully, *"I made it! I almost thought that my host would be lost for sure."*

At that very moment, the national first-rate military hospital Ling Lan was in was plunged into darkness. Soon after, the entire capital along with several neighbouring provinces and cities also joined it in the dark.

The impossible occurrence of such a wide-scale simultaneous blackout affecting the capital and several other province cities immediately prompted a commotion in the otherwise quiet night.

Fortunately, the blackout did not last long, only lasting for 3 minutes. All the cities quickly returned to normal, leaving only the National Power Company in disarray. Within those 3 minutes, the electricity they had supplied to those involved cities had mysteriously disappeared, as if the Power Company had not provided any electricity to begin with. But in reality, as proven by their numerical data, they had released more than a trillion kilowatts in those 3 minutes, a greater amount than they ever had before.

This matter was quickly handed over to the National Security Agency to investigate. After several months, the answer given to the public was that the computer systems used by the Power Company to track the electric supply had been broken into by hackers, who had then tampered with the data and stopped the power supply, resulting in the mass blackout. And just like that, the public outcry over the blackout drew to a close.

However, the investigation results that were finally sealed into the nation's top-secret security files were as follows — unexplainable phenomenon. The power disappeared into thin air, just as if it were an act of God!

Star Calendar Year 4731:

At the spaceport of Planet Anta, all the warriors headed for the front lines were lined up to enter the regular battleships. Meanwhile, in front of the commanding mothership of the top-ranked official, a pair of lovers faced each other among the

crowds of people saying goodbye, speaking in soft tones with their hands clasped.

"Ling Xiao, you must come back alive," pleaded Lan Luofeng with teary eyes.

Ling Xiao nodded. He had not expected that he would have to rush into battle after being married for only two months, but the enemy was relentless and their nation wasn't faring very well, leaving him no choice but to take action.

"I leave the household in your hands." Ling Xiao felt sorry for his newly wedded wife due to his imminent departure — once he left, all the messy bothersome issues in the family would fall upon this delicate woman before him. Could she hold off those greedy people? In his heart, he wasn't at all certain.

With red-rimmed eyes, but a firm voice, Lan Luofeng said, "Don't worry, Ling Xiao. I will take good care of our household." She placed Ling Xiao's hand on her abdomen, and said shyly, "In another eight months or so, you are going to be a father."

"We have a child? That's great!" Blindsided by the happy news, Ling Xiao embraced his wife and twirled her around in circles, joyous laughter spilling from his mouth.

Lan Luofeng held onto Ling Xiao anxiously but did nothing to stop his celebratory actions. After a long while, Ling Xiao finally put Lan Luofeng down and hugged her close, saying, "Luofeng, thank you!"

"What are you saying? I am your wife, and this... is also a child I anticipate."

Lan Luofeng smiled gently with her hand pressed against her abdomen, the joy in her heart overflowing. "I wanted to ask, what shall we name the child?"

At her words, Ling Xiao started to consider it seriously. Looking at the mirrored joy on his wife's face, a spark of inspiration flared. "I have decided. Whether it is a boy or a girl, our child shall be called Ling Lan! The child is both yours and mine, and is worthy to bear both our surnames." Lan Luofeng was also an only child, so perhaps this name would give his wife some happiness.

Sure enough, Lan Luofeng was overjoyed, nodding vigorously. "Yes, let's do as you say."

The tears in her eyes could no longer be held back, and Ling Xiao could do nothing but frantically help her wipe them away.

At this time, the platform announced the call for final boarding. Lan Luofeng hurriedly composed herself, wiped away the rest of her tears, and said with a smile, "Ling Xiao, you must fulfil your promise to me — Ling Lan and I will wait for your return together."

Ling Xiao nodded gravely. "I always fulfil my promises."

With anticipation for his child in his heart, Ling Xiao left, boarding the commanding mothership under Lan Luofeng's teary gaze. Very quickly, the commanding mothership closed its doors and started up, and under the guidance of air control, it disengaged from the navigation frame of the port, slowly rose into the air, and pulled away from the Star of Anta, leading innumerable battleships into deep space.

Meanwhile, unnoticed by the people focused on the departure of the airships, a massive amount of energy was generated by the simultaneous powering up of the countless airships, causing this patch of space to waver and even fold in on itself in some places. An almost microscopic particle suddenly appeared out of thin air and rushed towards the Star of Anta at the speed of light.

Still mired in sadness, Lan Luofeng suddenly felt her abdomen grow hot and cold and couldn't help but scream out in shock, her hands drifting instinctively to cover her belly. This drew the concern of the chamberlain Ling Qin, who until now had been quietly standing watch like wallpaper in the background.

"Young mistress, are you alright?"

Lan Luofeng closed her eyes and carefully took stock of herself. Finding nothing wrong, she finally relaxed, and replied, "Uncle Qin, I'm fine. I think I was just a little too emotional."

At that, Ling Qin breathed out a sigh of relief, "Young mistress, since the young master has already left Anta, I think we should go home now. It's too chaotic here, I'm afraid it may be harmful to your health."

Lan Luofeng was not a stubborn person, and she felt that Ling Qin's concerns had merit, so she nodded and said, "Lead the way, Uncle Qin."

In short order, the two of them were seated in a hover car, speeding away from the spaceport towards home.

Chapter 2

Young Master Ling Lan is born!

Ling Lan once again regained consciousness, but this time there seemed to be something wrong with her eyes, so she could only rely on her sense of feeling. It felt as if she was contained in a sealed vat of warm water, surrounded by liquid on all sides. At times, the vat seemed to be moved by someone, and she would be bumped around.

Could it be that she didn't die? Had she been placed into a nutrient solution by the hospital to take care of her body?

Before she could figure things out, her consciousness faded, and she was enveloped by darkness once again.

After an indeterminate amount of time, she woke up again, still within the warm liquid, and this time she was aware for a little longer than before. This time, she could hear some sounds, although they sounded muffled as if coming from several walls away, so she could not make anything out clearly. She really wanted to know what was happening to her, but being unable to move, she could only work on trying to decipher the sounds. Before she could make any progress, however, she lost consciousness again.

Dammit! Couldn't she just have a little more time? As Ling Lan lost awareness, she couldn't help but make this brief protest.

As if Ling Lan's protest was heard, the time Ling Lan spent awake grew longer and longer, until one day, she found that she could move.

After being trapped for so long, she naturally swung her fists and kicked out with all her might, but after only a few movements, she was entirely tired out and even felt sleepy again.

This would not do. She could not keep being weak like this, or else how would she endure the inhuman pain when it came? Speaking of which, she hadn't felt pain in a long time. Could it be that the pain only came while she was unconscious? Ling Lan suddenly felt that being unconscious could also be a good thing.

However, Ling Lan was not a girl who liked to avoid her troubles, or else she would not have had been able to live every day with excruciating pain for 24 years. She rallied her spirits and began to practice the set of health-bolstering Qi cultivation exercises taught to her by an old Chinese doctor who had treated her when she had first entered the military hospital.

Even though she still had not felt any Qi form after over 10 years of practice, the pain in her body would lessen greatly after each session and become easier to endure. While this may well have been due to self-delusion, or some sort of placebo effect, it had nevertheless provided her with motivation to continue practicing the exercises.

She lost consciousness as she practiced, and when she awoke once again, an unknown period of time had passed. She moved her limbs and shifted around for a bit before stopping to get a sense of her own condition and was immediately dumbfounded. She could actually sense something which she had never felt before... something like Qi. It was unreal, like something out of fantasy — could it be that she was a talent blessed by the heavens, and her fake death had caused two of her extraordinary meridians, Ren and Du, to open up, turning her into a martial arts master?

Ling Lan could not understand why she succeeded this time when hard training for over 10 years had had no effect. Still, being able to sense Qi was a good thing. The old Chinese doctor had said that if she could achieve a sense of Qi, her illness would have the possibility of being healed. For 24 years she had wished for her illness to be cured so that she would no longer have to live every day in almost unbearable pain, feeling as if her entire body was being crushed.

Ling Lan was ecstatic, and her enthusiasm for practice grew. She began practicing during her every waking moment, and this continued until she achieved a meditative state. Until now, she still had no clue that she had become a fetus, and that what had happened in her past life was no longer any of her concern, and that her worries were for naught.

Lan Luofeng caressed her abdomen with a face full of worry. She was already 5 months into her pregnancy, but she had not felt any recent fetal movement from her baby. If it weren't for the fact that all the medical exams showed that her child was developing normally, she would surely have had a mental breakdown.

Truthfully, she could take no more bad news. A month after her husband Ling Xiao had left for battle, news had come saying that there had been an accident when the fleet he was leading had entered a death tunnel to outflank the enemy camp, and that headquarters had lost all contact with his fleet.

Later on, it was confirmed that the fleet had run into some energy disturbance in the depths of the dead star meteorite zone while passing through the death tunnel, and the entire fleet had been consumed by this devastating energy. There were no survivors. Every single member was lost, and no remains could be found.

Before she could even fully absorb this terrible news, something even more distasteful had happened. A branch family member N-generations apart from Ling Xiao had 'stepped up' to inherit the honours and privileges gained by Ling Xiao's sacrifice. He had even had the gall to imply that he was doing her a great favour and would take care of her for the rest of her life.

Lan Luofeng had thrown that disgusting man out immediately, but those horrid people had been unwilling to give up. They had brought a representative over from the federal government to discuss the matter.

Lan Luofeng was not a weak person. She knew that crying would only result in Ling Xiao's sacrifice being taken advantage of by these despicable people. With no other choice, she made a prompt decision. In front of those hateful and despicable people, she proclaimed that Ling Xiao had a son who was currently in her belly, and that only his son had the right to inherit all of Ling Xiao's accolades.

Bias actually existed in the Federation's inheritance law with regards to military benefits — only male family members were allowed to inherit. This was why Lan Luofeng did not reveal she had a child from the beginning. Both she and the chamberlain Ling Qin knew that the child in her belly was a girl, but under these circumstances, she could not retreat. Ling Qin was in agreement and fully supported her decision.

They had already thought it through — the moment Ling Lan was born, they would arrange for another baby girl to be raised alongside Ling Lan to be her loyal guard, who would also marry Ling Lan publicly once they were adults.

They would also think of a way to manage Ling Lan's other identity so that she would be able to appear in public as a girl as well. Of course, all this still required more

detailed thought and consideration. Still, Lan Luofeng believed that by the time Ling Lan grew up she would definitely have been able to come up with a solution that would give Ling Lan the best of both worlds.

Lan Luofeng had only one unwavering thought, and that was that all of Ling Xiao and her possessions could only belong to Ling Lan. All those other bastards who crawled out from god-knows-where would not be allowed to take advantage of Ling Lan. She would not allow it, never, no matter the cost.

Of course, another reason for Lan Luofeng's confidence was the unwavering loyalty of the main household vassals of Ling Xiao. They closed ranks around the Ling family home and kept a close watch, leaving those greedy outsiders no chance to harm their young master. Furthermore, the Ling family also had their own personal hospital, which made it even more convenient for Lan Luofeng to hide the secret of Ling Lan's gender.

Just like that, under this strict guard, the time for Lan Luofeng to give birth finally arrived. Naturally, the chosen place of birth was their personal hospital. No mistakes could be made at this final juncture. The doctors and nurses responsible for Lan Luofeng's delivery were family loyalists specially arranged by the Ling family — they would never ever expose this secret.

Ling Lan was still practicing when cry after piercing cry disturbed her meditation, causing her to be very annoyed. At the same time, she could hear the sound of water flowing, and then her body was being repelled by some unknown force, and she was sliding downwards headfirst.

In shock, she immediately spread open her legs to hold her position, stopping her body from sliding down any further.

"God dammit, why doesn't this child come out? The amniotic fluid has almost run dry." The delivering doctor and nurses were sweating buckets. Everything looked like it was going well, but the child just did not want to come out. It was looking more and more like a case of obstructed labour. If that was the case, then they would have to do a caesarean section. Under those circumstances, their little miss's secret could not be guaranteed since too many people would have to be involved, highly increasing the likelihood of the secret being leaked.

Lan Luofeng gritted her teeth and petted her distended belly, saying, "Dear, stop tormenting mummy. Come out quickly to meet me. Even if you are angry at mummy for making you live an abnormal life, you still need to come out to yell at me, right?"

...Alright, Lan Luofeng's IQ had dropped into the negatives due to the pain, so what she said should not be taken seriously. Which mother wants her child to yell at herself?

But Lan Luofeng's words were heard by Ling Lan, and combined with what she just felt, along with her condition a while back, Ling Lan abruptly realised she had become a fetus. No wonder she had been unable to move for such a long time...

However, didn't she die? Was she reincarnated? Why didn't she drink Meng-Po soup ¹? Were the memories of her past life too deeply ingrained? The gentle and mellifluous voice of her current mother proved that this was not her mother from her past life, so that ruled out the possibility of rebirth.

"Oh geez, you still have the spare time to think about reincarnation and rebirth? Your mother is about to suffer from obstructed labour because of you... draw back your legs now!" A childish voice rang out in her mind in a panicked tone, reminding her of what she was supposed to do right now.

Ling Lan listened and drew back her legs. Then she heard a soul-wrenching scream, and a surge of energy pushed her body out.

Instantly, she could sense the presence of light...

Before she could do anything, she felt fingers digging into her mouth, making her feel like puking. She couldn't help but open her mouth to protest, and then she heard her own screeching calls!

That's right, calls! Ling Lan would never admit that those were wails — that would be too embarrassing.

"Mistress, the young miss is healthy!" The Ling family doctor finally gave a sigh of relief. With both mother and child safe, their duty was done. All smiles, she brought the now stubbornly silent Ling Lan over to Lan Luofeng's side.

Lan Luofeng opened her tired eyes and caressed her child lovingly. Then her expression tightened. Resolutely, she said, "Tell Uncle Qin both Young Master Ling Lan and I are fine!"

"Yes, Mistress!" The doctor stifled his smile and donned a similarly serious expression.

The birth of the young miss, no, the young master did not mean the end of the matter. To fully protect the privileges left behind by Major General Ling Xiao, there were still many hard battles to be fought.

Chapter 3

Assessment of the Newborn!

Properly cleaned up, Lan Luofeng and Ling Lan were moved to a deluxe hospital room where Ling Qin had already set up a specialised instrument used to assess the various body stats and potential of infants.

"Mistress, allow me to examine the young master's condition." In truth, Ling Qin was a little disappointed that the child was a girl. Even if Major General Ling Xiao's premium military benefits were successfully inherited by the young miss, the Ling family would have no chance within this generation to obtain the strongest ultimate weapon which represented the Federation — just like the one Major General Ling Xiao had — the IN mecha!

The Federation's law allowing only male relatives to inherit military honours and benefits, though seemingly biased, did in fact have some basis. Among all the functioning IN mechas, there was not a single one with a female operator.

The requirements to be an IN mecha operator were extremely high — not only did you need to have immense spiritual power, you also needed a strong and sturdy body. This was because the IN mechas were operated by a combination of willpower and body movement, which worked together to realise many extremely dangerous and complicated attacks and combat techniques. Depending on the power behind these movements, a fraction of the energy was reflected back to the operator. Without a strong body, an operator could be injured just by executing a single basic move.

The natural physical difference between men and women may not be noticeable with regular mecha, but it was glaringly obvious when it came to IN mecha. There wasn't a single woman who could withstand that sort of recoil, even if she had trained up a muscular body. With regards to operating the IN mecha, the natural physical gap between the genders could not be eliminated by hard work.

Then let's talk about those inherited military benefits. Those benefits actually referred to valuable resources being cultivated by the nation. The nation would invest vast amounts of money and manpower to nurture the designated inheritors of those military benefits. The grand goal was that these carefully cultivated candidates would

be able to operate an IN mecha someday and become an ultimate weapon in service of the country.

Therefore, women, who could not operate IN mecha, had been directly cast aside by the Federation. As those politicians would say, they could not waste taxpayers' money, right? And so this outright biased law which discriminated against women was officially ratified without facing any opposition from the general public.

Naturally, the present Ling Lan knew nothing of this. Right after her first two grand cries at her birth, she had jumped straight into training, because at the very moment she had entered the world, she had found that her sense of Qi had heightened even further, giving her an almost roiling sensation. Even if she had no idea what was happening, she instinctively knew that this was a golden opportunity that should not be missed, and so immediately entered a meditative state without regard to where she was.

Of course, Ling Lan was only so bold because she was an infant. Besides sleeping and eating, and eating and sleeping, she basically had nothing else to do. Even if she entered a training trance, outside observers would just assume she was sleeping, and would not be particularly worried. More importantly, from the words she had heard her mother speak at her birth, she knew that her mother in this life would make sure she was well-protected, which gave her the reassurance to just let go and focus on training.

Lan Luofeng carefully passed Ling Lan over into Ling Qin's arms and watched as Ling Qin slowly placed Ling Lan into a transparent elliptical compartment.

The moment Ling Qin withdrew his arms, the transparent compartment sealed itself and beams of alternating green and red light swept across Ling Lan's body.

Suddenly, the transparent compartment emitted a piercing warning whistle ——

"What's going on?" Lan Luofeng sat up hurriedly in her bed. Her face, which was already pale due to her recent delivery, turned even paler in her fright and worry over her child.

Ling Qin was just as taken aback by this unexpected warning whistle. However, before Ling Qin could rush over to check, the warning whistle went silent, and the assessment resumed as normal.

Everyone was still alarmed and uncertain, but they did not dare to stop the assessment of Ling Lan and so continued to wait patiently.

Ling Lan was utterly oblivious to all of this — at that moment a childish voice in her mind was crowing gleefully, *"Luckily I have quick reflexes, or else my host's secret would have been revealed. When I greet the host later, I must get her to praise me well... hehe!"*

Finally, the assessment device started to report its findings.

Assessment data:

Physical Fitness: [S] rank!

Spiritual Power: Tier-2!

Potential: [S] rank!

Assessment overview: Excellent; focused cultivation recommended.

Ling Qin was astounded by these results. In disbelief, he rushed over to take a closer look at the copy of the results printed out by the machine.

The results were clearly printed out in black and white, proving that he had not misheard.

[S] rank physical fitness was rare even among male infants, appearing at a rate of 1 or 2 in a thousand. Of course this wasn't the most extreme case, for Ling Lan's father, Ling Xiao, had been a gifted genius born with a physical fitness of [SS] rank, which occurred at a rate of 1 in several ten thousand. Ling Qin suspected that Ling Lan's good physical fitness must have been inherited from her father.

Even more surprising, Ling Lan possessed natural tier-2 spiritual power. This meant that Ling Lan would have a natural advantage in mental training, a situation which only occurred at a rate of 1 in several ten thousand individuals...

Deeply moved, Ling Qin shivered. Even Ling Lan's father, the Major General Ling Xiao, had only possessed tier-1 spiritual power at birth.

[S] rank potential — the same basic assessment as Major General Ling Xiao. Major General Ling Xiao was the operator of an IN mecha... does that mean that their young

miss Ling Lan might also be able to operate an IN mecha?

An IN mecha operator... Ling Qin's shivers intensified at the thought, and he almost burst into tears. Could it be that the Ling family would produce the first female IN mecha operator?

If that happened, it would truly be a slap in the face to all those federalists!

Although Lan Luofeng was also shocked by the results of Ling Lan's assessment, she was at heart a mother, and her first thought was how she could protect her child. Solemnly, she said, "Uncle Qin, Ling Lan's assessment results must be sealed."

If Ling Lan's assessment were to be made public, the nation would certainly suggest taking her in for intensive cultivation. If Ling Lan were a boy, Lan Luofeng would have been fine with that. However, Ling Lan was a girl, and Lan Luofeng would not see her daughter suffer that life. Also, if the nation were to decide to send over specialised trainers instead, the secret of Ling Lan's gender would also be easily exposed. Thus, Lan Luofeng was determined that Ling Lan's assessment be sealed.

Actually, even before Ling Lan was born, Lan Luofeng had already decided that she would let Ling Lan live as she pleased. She did not really want Ling Lan to follow in her father's footsteps and become part of the military. Lan Luofeng knew very well that as long as Ling Lan did not commit any major crime such as treason, she would be able to live off of the premium military benefits earned by Ling Xiao's sacrifice the way she wanted without worry. Even if Ling Lan wanted to live like a rich wastrel, Lan Luofeng would not object.

Lan Luofeng looked upon Ling Lan in the device with loving yet remorseful eyes and thought, "Sorry, baby Ling Lan, for making you live an abnormal life... It's because you are Ling Xiao's daughter, and I will not permit anyone other than you to enjoy the privileges your father's sacrifice have gained.

"But you are also my daughter, and I love you, so I selfishly do not wish for you to bear the burdens of the Ling family. In the future, I won't go out of my way to raise you in any specific way — you will be free to choose whichever path you'd like. Even if you end up being a wastrel, mummy will always support you."

It must be admitted that Lan Luofeng had the makings of an irrationally protective mother — if Ling Lan were to wish for the destruction of the Ling family in the future,

Lan Luofeng may even help draw up the plans with full enthusiasm.

Chapter 4

The Childish Voice in the Mind!

Ling Lan was putting a lot of effort into training this time around. Her whole body felt so comfortable, as if it were soaking in a hot spring, making her unwilling to end her training session. Unfortunately, some unidentified creature would not leave her alone and kept nattering on and on by her ear. She suddenly realized something she could never figure out before, the deeper meaning behind the monkey king Wukong's words in the grand epic *Journey to the West* : "It's as if there's a fly buzzing about every day... sorry, not just one, but a swarm of flies around you, buzzing... it really makes you want to scream for help!"

Right now, she wished that she could do as Wukong did and grab hold of the fly, squeeze it until its insides burst out, and then use its own intestines to strangle it. Ha, until its entire tongue stuck out! And then she would flip her hand and dump it on the floor. Phew ——— and the whole world would be peaceful again.

Of course, Ling Lan could only fantasize about this because this fly was living in her head, so there was no way for her to bring it to justice.

Finally, Ling Lan could not take it anymore and was forced to end her session and wake up. Furious, she yelled at it internally, *"Dammit, who the hell are you?"*

As if frightened by her forceful roar, the childish voice only responded after a long while. Warily, it said, *"Mecha learning device number 444444444 from the Mechanical Kingdom of the Mandora star system! Also your contracted long-term companion."*

Ling Lan was stunned — could it be that every child in this world she was reincarnated into was equipped with a similar learning device? It looked like the technology of this world was very impressive. She wondered if there was a huge difference compared to her original world.

As if sensing Ling Lan's question, the childish voice rang out in her mind once again, its tone dismissive. *"How could this world have such a progressive learning device such as myself? Also, you may have forgotten, but it was I who put you back in one piece when your spiritual self almost dispersed after your physical body died."*

Ling Lan abruptly remembered the voice she had heard when she had died in her past life. Her expression changed dramatically, *"What in the world happened?"*

The childlike voice replied, *"Your previous body could not support your powerful spiritual power, and so thoroughly collapsed. Luckily for you, a once in a blue moon wormhole happened to open up right then. I managed to gather your diffusing spiritual energy at the final moment and took the opportunity to absorb some local energy to carry your spiritual self through the wormhole to this advanced world 10000 years in the future."*

"How does that work?" Ling Lan was very curious, what did this have to do with her luck?

The childlike voice sniffed. *"If we had remained in your original world, even if I had taken your spiritual self and let you be reborn there, you would still have died in the end. The weak physical bodies of the babies there would never have been able to support your immense spiritual self."*

As if sensing that it hadn't explained clearly enough, the childlike voice added, *"Even an adult's body wouldn't have worked. The result would have been a replica of your previous body."*

Ling Lan shuddered. She did not want to experience that pain — of all her organs failing and breaking apart, then healing only to break apart again — ever again.

At that thought, Ling Lan asked worriedly, *"And there's no worry of that now?"*

The childlike voice sounded pleased with itself as it responded. *"That's right. 10000 years later, spiritual power has been successfully uncovered and developed. Now, the bodies of babies are strong even in their mother's wombs, and some may even be able to withstand tier-3 or tier-4 spiritual power from birth. So long as you take a little care, you won't die."*

Hearing this, Ling Lan relaxed. Being able to live on was all she was asking for.

However, what the childlike voice said next made Ling Lan's heart leap into her throat once again. *"That being said, I still have to help you restrain your spiritual power, or else your current body will still be unable to take it."*

"Then, will there be any danger?" The learning device sounded so young... was it really

reliable? Ling Lan couldn't help but worry.

"I can only guarantee you two years without worry. If you don't work hard to increase your body's resilience within this time frame... you will still end up dead as a doornail!"

The childlike voice revealed hints of schadenfreude, causing Ling Lan to feel threatened and angry at the same time. Since they had already traversed through time and space, couldn't this fellow have chosen a better world that would have eliminated this problem completely?

The childish voice sounded put out at her thoughts. *"No one knows where a wormhole will lead to. I already said that you were lucky — if we had arrived at a world worse than your own, you'd already be dead as a doornail."*

Ling Lan felt a little sheepish after hearing this. She was only alive because of this fellow after all — she really shouldn't repay its kindness with ingratitude.

Wait a minute. Ling Lan recalled that even though she had been physically weak before the age of three, constantly sick and bedridden, her body had still been far from breaking down. It was only after age three that her body's condition suddenly deteriorated drastically. Could it be that — Ling Lan's expression grew cold. *"Is there anything else you haven't told me?"*

The childlike voice sensed that the truth it wanted to hide had been discovered by its host, and so helplessly decided to confess. *"I'm also not sure... I just know that when I woke up, I was already contracted to you. I have tested your spiritual power before — in your world, your spiritual power was much, much higher than the average person's, registering at tier-2... perhaps that is why I was able to be bound to you. Of course, my awakening caused your spiritual power to directly jump up a level, and the bodies of your world then were incapable of sustaining tier-3 spiritual power."*

At long last Ling Lan had found the true culprit behind her death. Her emotions were jumbled and she had no idea how she was supposed to react.

Seeing this, the childlike voice panicked, saying sadly, *"I didn't do it on purpose. I'm not sure myself how we met. I thought I could only exist within the Mandora star system."* Even now, it still had no clue how it had gotten to that primitive planet.

Ling Lan was a person who could not abide tears. She could not bear to see anyone cry, not even herself. The cause lay with her illness — though they tried to hide it, her

parents had pretty much been in tears every day; she had noticed, but had no way of consoling them, and she hated that sense of helplessness. Thus, 'Crying is forbidden' became one of Ling Lan's life principles, one which she carried with her to this world as well.

"Alright, stop it, I'm not blaming you. All I can say is that this was all fate." Ling Lan gave up, deciding to let bygones be bygones. Although this self-titled mecha learning device had cost her her life in the past world, it had also given her another life, making them even.

Besides that, her parents in her past life would still have her younger brother to take care of them in their old age. Without the burden of caring for her, their lives should be much easier and also much happier. Considering this, Ling Lan decided to let things go.

Perhaps the suffering she endured in her previous life had given her peerless inner strength — very quickly, Ling Lan had thrown off the fetters of her past life, and her heart felt all the lighter for it.

Now that her doubts and worries had been addressed, she soon remembered that she had been pestered to wakefulness by this learning device. What did it want? It was hard to imagine that they had chattered on for almost half a day without even touching on the matter. Ling Lan sweat-dropped — could it be that her concentration and thought processes had been weakened since she had become a baby again?

Putting that thought aside for now, Ling Lan asked, *"So, what did you wake me up for exactly?"*

Chapter 5

Luckily Still a Girl

The learning device was just rejoicing over the fact that Ling Lan did not blame it when it registered Ling Lan's question. Its joy disappeared, and it explained hurriedly, *"You've been asleep for two days and two nights for no apparent reason. Your mother has been crying so much that she hasn't been able to keep any food down due to worry. They've decided that if you still haven't woken up by tomorrow, they'll send you to the hospital. From what I could gather, admitting you to a hospital will cause them a lot of trouble. I felt that something wasn't right about the situation, so I rushed to wake you up."*

A jolt ran through Ling Lan — she could not be admitted! Who knew if the technology here would be able to sense this fellow hiding within her mind? If it were discovered, she would most certainly end up as a lab rat. She must make sure this didn't happen.

For her own safety and personal freedom, Ling Lan decided not to fight it any longer. She allowed her throat to open up and started bawling, signalling to the people watching over her that she was awake.

Frankly, Ling Lan had only intended to make a little noise, maybe a gurgle or a soft whine, but the sound that poured out of her throat was alarmingly loud...

The childish voice almost shut down in fear. Hesitantly, it asked, *"Was it necessary to cry so tragically?"*

Taken aback herself by the volume and emotion in her own cry, Ling Lan responded sheepishly, *"Can't help it. My body's starving..."*

Losing to her own body's needs, Ling Lan felt that all hope was lost — there went her angelic baby image. Truth be told, she had really wanted to be an angelic baby, well-behaved and adorable, becoming the apple of her new parents' eyes. But it looks like that plan had gone up in smoke.

Because no matter how you look, a baby who would cry in such a frightening manner couldn't be described as angelic in any way...

Ling Lan's energetic cries woke the person resting right beside her. Lan Luofeng sprang up and pulled her daughter into her arms, looking her over with joyful, yet shocked and fearful, eyes.

Her daughter had finally woken up! But she was crying so piteously — could there be something wrong with her?

The doctor on-call rushed over from the room next door. After a detailed examination, it was determined that Ling Lan was just really hungry.

Lan Luofeng looked down at Ling Lan suckling at her breast and felt her heart slowly settle back into her chest.

After drinking her fill, flushed with wine... er, milk, Ling Lan finally had the strength to take a good look at the world around her for the first time.

She was in a large bedroom, so large that Ling Lan could not see the entirety of the bedroom just by turning her small head around.

The furnishings of the room were light and tasteful; no bold or garish colours were present. One of the first things Ling Lan noticed was that the bed she and her mom was lying on seemed very wide. Putting aside the space they had claimed, there was still more than enough space for her to roll around several times — that is, of course, if she could roll.

There were no bedside cabinets installed at the head of the bed, as was the fashion in her previous world, instead, there were several metallic-looking objects near the corners of the room. The design of the objects was rather strange, giving Ling Lan the impression of robots.

Within Ling Lan's range of sight, she could see no wardrobes or any other furniture of the like — that is to say, there was no other furniture she could see besides the bed.

Ling Lan did not think much of this. This is ten thousand years later after all — who knows how the world has developed? As long as she continued to live, she would surely find all the answers she needed. There was no hurry at all.

There was another person in the room, an elderly lady, who stood watch beside her mother. Ling Lan glanced at her curiously and found that she had a kind but serious face, and seemed to be very attentive to her mother's needs. She was probably not an

elder in the family, but rather a long-time servant of the household.

Seeing this, Ling Lan was glad. This meant that the family she had been born into was rather well-off, so she wouldn't have to worry much about daily living. In her previous world, she had had to bear so much frustration and hardship due to the lack of money caused by her illness — she was glad that she could avoid all that in this world.

At this point, Ling Lan was still blissfully unaware that being the child of a well-off family could sometimes bring about even greater frustration and hardship. Of course, that is a story for another time, so we shall not talk about it for now.

After finishing her observation of her surroundings, Ling Lan turned her gaze upon her mother lying beside her, who had a soft smile on her face as she held Ling Lan's tiny hand. Her mother was a great beauty — even as a female, Ling Lan was enthralled just staring at her.

Ling Lan was very pleased by this; no one wants to be plain after all. Her mother's beauty meant that she would also grow up to be beautiful. Even if she didn't end up a great beauty like her mother, she would still be attractive enough to turn heads.

Right then, a middle-aged man, roughly between the ages of 40 and 50, walked over to the bed. It was the chamberlain Ling Qin. He stood respectfully by the bed as he addressed Lan Luofeng.

"Mistress, everything has been handled with both the government and the military. In a month, the Federation will officially dispense young master Ling Lan's right to inherit." Ling Qin's tone was solemn — if it were at all possible, he would rather see his master, the mainstay of the family, alive to guard the mistress and the young miss. Not this, where the young miss would be forced to lead an abnormal life.

Young master Ling Lan? Ling Lan heard her name, and her spirits perked up in response. So this world had a boy who shared her name? Speaking of which... she still didn't know what her current name was.

After hearing what Ling Qin had to say, Lan Luofeng's eyes turned red, and crystalline tears fell. "Ling Xiao would definitely be happy about this."

Lan Luofeng's reaction sent the old servant beside her into a fluster, and she only managed to calm Lan Luofeng down after some difficulty.

Lan Luofeng wiped away her tears. She knew she had to control her sadness. She could not let herself fall — all that remained of Ling Xiao and her baby Ling Lan needed her protection. Even if Ling Lan were to successfully inherit everything of Ling Xiao's, there were still many dangers lying in wait for her as she grew up. Lan Luofeng knew she could not let down her guard.

Lan Luofeng bent over to kiss Ling Lan on the cheek. "Ling Lan, my child, mummy is sorry. From now on, you are the young master of the Ling family — you can only be the young master of the Ling family!" The guilt Lan Luofeng felt for forcing this upon her daughter was undeniable, however, the determination in her eyes was also immovable.

Lan Luofeng's words sent Ling Lan into a tailspin. Young master Ling Lan? Me? F*ck! I was reincarnated into this world as a boy? No no no, I must have heard wrong...

Perhaps Lan Luofeng had pushed herself to the limit over the last two days fretting over Ling Lan, for she fell asleep soon after she finished speaking.

Meanwhile, when the old servant turned away to do some other chores, Ling Lan subtly moved a small hand downwards to explore between her legs...

It's flat! Ling Lan's heart calmed immediately.

Luckily I'm still a girl, she thought. Without that extra appendage down there, she wouldn't have to live the strange life of being neither man nor woman and worry about her mind being a mess.

Of course Ling Lan was also very happy that she could still go by the name Ling Lan. She had been called by that name for over twenty years after all — it would have been a little hard to accept if she had to suddenly change her name.

However, her happiness did not last long before it was driven away by a wave of anxiety.

If the phrase 'young master' had the same meaning as it did in her original world in the past, then she was in some pretty deep trouble. There must be some unavoidable reason why she would have to dress and present herself as a man.

The guilt in her mother's eyes was clear. Despite that, her mother still chose this path. This could only mean that the situation was already so bad that Ling Lan had no other

choice but to be a man to salvage the situation.

Chapter 6

A Shameless Person

Very quickly, a month had gone by, and it was time for the Federation to officially announce the inheritance.

During this month, Ling Lan did not do anything besides eat or sleep. Of course, Ling Lan's 'sleep' was actually a training trance.

That said, Ling Lan was much smarter about it now. She assigned Little Four the task of waking her up whenever it was time to eat — she had no intention of misjudging her training time again. She did not want to be dragged to the hospital for a check-up after all, and risk exposing her secret and the existence of Little Four only to become a lab rat.

Who is Little Four, you ask? Who else could it be but that little fellow who claimed to be a mecha learning device?

Two weeks ago, under its guidance, Ling Lan had managed to pull together a mental network after around ten days of experimentation. Using it, she had explored her mindscape and managed to find the main body of the learning device deep within it. She had then successfully unlocked the virtual learning space of the device. In the future, it would be much more convenient for her to meet the learning device — she would just have to will it, and her consciousness would be brought into the virtual learning space.

Ling Lan still remembered how she had almost spewed blood when she first saw Little Four's virtual body.

In truth, Little Four's appearance was very charming. It looked like a little boy of only three to four years old, with a bright and innocent smile on his face. In the words of modern-day slang, extremely 'moe ¹'. Ling Lan couldn't help but find it adorable.

The only problem was... the little fellow had been too excited, and had flounced up to her completely naked, butt jiggling.

And so tragedy befell poor Little Four — he had been immediately scooped up and spanked soundly, until his white and bouncy little behind had been imprinted with the shape of Ling Lan's palms.

Dammit, why did he have to show her his dick? Although his dick was so small that it could almost be ignored... but it was still a dick, wasn't it? How could he do that to a pure and innocent maiden like her?

Of course, although the spanking relieved Ling Lan's embarrassed anger, the little boy became angry in turn. In protest, he hid away in the depths of her mind and refused to come out again.

At first, Ling Lan did not take it to heart, but when the situation showed no signs of improving after two days, Ling Lan gave in.

She needed the little fellow to help wake her up after all. Resigned, Ling Lan patiently cajoled the little fellow out and promised to never resort to this sort of domestic violence ever again. Only then did the little boy return to his bouncy happy self.

The two started talking a bit more, and when Ling Lan asked how she should address him, the boy's response annoyed Ling Lan once again.

This little rascal actually wanted her to call him 'Master Four'? He didn't even have any body hair yet and he wanted this older sister to call him 'Master'?

Even though Ling Lan had promised to never again use domestic violence, she still had other tricks up her sleeve. Under the full force of her logical-illogical-rational-irrational arguments, the little fellow agreed without question to be called 'Little Four'.

Victory! Ling Lan was uncharacteristically proud of herself for this.

However, when she found out later why Little Four had first wanted her to call him Master Four, she found herself speechless.

Little Four explained that it had found that the title 'Master' was extremely popular in books, TV, and the internet back on Earth, and since his designation had so many fours, what else could he be called but 'Master Four'?

Ling Lan felt that she had been mistaken. She should never have tried to probe the

motivations of a machine — doing so was an insult to her intelligence.

Once Ling Lan had managed to establish a connection with Little Four, she could freely access the virtual learning environment. Besides that, within this month, she had also picked up from the conversations between her mother and the chamberlain Ling Qin that her father of this world had died on the battlefield, which is why she had to inherit her father's military benefits by posing as a man.

Ling Lan couldn't help but sigh — it seemed that sexism existed everywhere. Gender equality had been a struggle back on Earth, and now, ten thousand years in the future, when humanity had already expanded beyond the solar system, gender oppression was still thriving.

The current Ling Lan had no clue what the military benefits were referring to. Although she could get the eager Little Four to look it up for her, she ultimately decided to take things one step at a time. There was still much she didn't know about this era, and it was probably wiser to take her time growing up to slowly understand the world around her instead of taking a shortcut.

Ling Lan was a very patient and tolerant person. Otherwise, she wouldn't have been able to live over twenty years suffering the inhuman pain of her body breaking down. This tolerance of hers was definitely far above the average person.

Initially, she had been worried about the two-year time limit that Little Four had mentioned — however, after some research, Little Four found that the Qi exercises she had been doing were an extremely effective way to increase physical fitness. According to Little Four's estimations, even if she did nothing else but practice those exercises for just ten hours every day, she would still be able to easily resolve the danger she would have faced in two years time.

And so, now that she knew her life was not on a timer, Ling Lan did not intend to hurry through life. She was still very young and did not want to stand out as a genius. Taking things a step at a time would be the safest and surest way to live. Ling Lan understood very well, after all, that the tree that grows above the tree-line gets toppled by the wind ².

Living freely was the most important thing!

Soon, it was time for the Federation to hand over the inheritance documents. On that day, Ling Lan could clearly sense the sorrow and distress emanating from her mother. Once the document was handed over, her father Ling Xiao's death would officially be announced to the public, and her mother would no longer be able to avoid the reality of his death.

Early that morning, Ling Lan sensed a disturbance in the typically peaceful household. However, since she was in the bedroom, she could not tell what was happening.

However, she was soon picked up by a servant and brought downstairs. As they moved down the stairway, Ling Lan could see the glorious lights hanging from the ceiling, their edges brushing the sides of several tall columns.

Yep, assessment complete. This was a grand and luxurious hall. Her family was indeed of the upper echelon.

Before Ling Lan could observe her fill, she had already been transferred into her mother's arms. Lan Luofeng's sombre mood improved considerably as she observed Ling Lan and her curious and roving eyes. Fortunately, Ling Xiao had left her this beautiful baby, giving her the strength to oppose those greedy wretches.

She grasped at her daughter's little hand, and calmly announced, "This is Ling Xiao's son Ling Lan! Only he shall inherit all that belongs to Ling Xiao."

At that moment, an old but strident voice spoke up, "We need to ensure that Major General Ling Xiao's sacrifice is not in vain. We are not denying Young Master Ling Lan's right to inherit, but only wish that the Ling family would choose the most outstanding child to inherit Major General Ling Xiao's premium military benefits, so that Major General Ling Xiao's unfinished duties can be taken up by the most suitable candidate."

Lan Luofeng turned a sharp gaze towards the old speaker. About seventy years old, he still stood proud and tall. He was the grand elder of the Ling branch family — Ling Suren, and even Ling Xiao had had to address him respectfully while he was still alive. He was also the one appointed by the branch family to protest Ling Lan's inheritance of Ling Xiao's possessions.

Ling Lan could feel Lan Luofeng's chest trembling as she tried to suppress her anger at Ling Suren's words.

Honestly, she had never met such a shameless person. Look at the way he spun words to justify taking away a child's right to inherit from his birth father — if his words were to be believed, what was the point of military men risking their lives to protect their country? When they died, did it mean that it was open season on their unprotected families?

Ling Lan pulled at her mother's fingers and gurgled.

Darn it. If only she were bigger, she would certainly spit upon that person's body to shame him for his shamelessness.

Chapter 7

Burning Bridges?

Ling Lan's actions soothed Lan Luofeng's heaving emotions. She knew that there were representatives from the federal government and the military present as well. She would not ruin Ling Lan's inheritance ceremony due to a rash moment of anger.

Suppressing her anger, Lan Luofeng asked coldly, "What are your intentions, Uncle Ren?"

Ling Suren's eyes narrowed, but he still revealed his plan in the end. "Among the children of the Ling family, age three and below, let us select the one with the best qualities and potential to inherit."

From birth to the age of three was the critical period for cultivation and moulding. After this time frame, the effects of cultivation would be greatly diminished, and cultivation would only become less and less effective with the passage of time.

Lan Luofeng scoffed, "Do you really think that any of the Ling family children would be able to hold a candle to Ling Xiao's own child? Let me remind you that Ling Xiao was an IN mecha operator." In the Federation, genetics decided everything. Very rarely did one see cases where a commoner would suddenly show extraordinary talent or physical qualities. The transmission of quality traits had to be gradually nurtured and built up from generation to generation.

"The Ling family managed to produce Ling Xiao — we can certainly produce another," said Ling Suren, his tone iron-clad with certainty. He could speak with such confidence because he already had a child with stats very similar to Ling Xiao within his grasp. This was why he was willing to go so far as to forgo civility to obtain Ling Xiao's military benefits. The Ling family must produce another Ling Xiao to maintain their foothold on the Planet of Doha.

Although the Federation currently touted the ideology of equality on the surface, in truth, there was a distinct social strata working behind the scenes which decided which planet you could live on.

The Planet of Doha was a premium planet, and was also the capital planet of the Federation. Those who lived on Doha were either high officials with both power and authority, military bigwigs, or those supremely wealthy noble families with long histories and great influence.

The Ling family was originally a small family who could only settle on a third-rate planet. However, they had managed to move to Doha due to the efforts of Ling Xiao's father, Ling Suzheng.

Ling Suzheng had been an ace pilot, but unfortunately did not manage to become an ultimate weapon of the nation — an IN mecha operator. Still, his abilities were such that no one below the level of an IN mecha operator could rival him. On the battlefield, he had managed to cut down many of the top enemy pilots, accumulating many battle honours in his lifetime. In the end, the military had decided to reward his exploits by allowing Ling Suzheng to bring his family to live on Doha, acknowledging his role as a new war hero.

To convince Ling Suzheng to bring the entire Ling family to Doha, and not just his own nuclear family, the Ling family head and elders of that time made a vow — the Ling family would view Ling Suzheng as the legitimate heir, and all the resources of the family would be his to command. On top of that, the position of family head would also be inherited by Ling Suzheng's descendants from then on.

On his end, Ling Suzheng had felt that he needed his family's support to establish himself on Doha, and so had agreed to move the entire Ling family.

This decision of Ling Suzheng's had brought endless trouble to Ling Xiao, and now had even opened the way for the side family to try and steal Ling Lan's inheritance. If Ling Suzheng only knew how he had invited wolves in with his kind gesture, he might be turning in his grave.

After living on Doha and enjoying its benefits for several decades, the Ling family had no intention of going back to how things were before. They knew very well that in twenty years, after focused cultivation from the country, if Ling Xiao's designated inheritor could not meet the minimum requirements set by the country, the Ling family would lose everything they had gained since coming to Doha. They would have to go back to being a middle-class family, no... perhaps even be reduced to becoming a lower-class family. This would greatly affect the Ling family income, as well as limit the romantic connections and career paths of the younger generations of the Ling

family. No, they would not allow it to happen.

Ling Suren did not give Lan Luofeng any chance to speak, but instead signalled for a woman who was carrying a one year old child to step forward. He pointed at the child and said, "This is the candidate that the Ling family has chosen. If Young Master Lan's body stats exceeds his, then we shall have no objection to Young Master Lan inheriting."

He turned to glance at the military representative. "I'm sure the military also wishes for the best talent for cultivation, and would not want to blindly take someone in based on blood."

The military representative just smiled slightly and said nothing, giving no indication of their stance one way or another.

Ling Suren had not expected outright vocal support from the military anyway; all he needed was this sort of ambiguous acceptance. He once again turned to Lan Luofeng, this time with a trace of self-satisfaction in his eyes.

Lan Luofeng smiled a small mocking smile. It looked like her decision to seal Ling Lan's assessment results was just another weakness to exploit from the perspective of the Ling family. Fortunately, chamberlain Ling Qin had predicted this move from them and had already made the appropriate arrangements.

"You dare to covet Ling Xiao's military privileges?" Lan Luofeng swept her gaze around the room. Among the visitors, there were quite a few bystanders enjoying the show, but there were also some who looked genuinely concerned for her. This trial was not without its benefits — she could finally discern the true colours of some of the people around her. "Although Major General Ling Xiao is dead, his orphaned child should not be allowed to be bullied by his own family clan. I'm sure that the military would have something to say about this?"

The military representative chose to ignore what Lan Luofeng was implying, saying with a smile, "Madam Ling, please be assured. Putting Major General Ling Xiao's military benefits aside, Ling Lan will not lose out on any benefits accorded to the children of martyrs. The military will not let a hero's child be bullied."

Although what the military representative had to say sounded pretty, the connotation was that the military benefits would go to the candidate that best suited the military's

purposes.

Lan Luofeng glanced at the government official, but he merely smiled without adding a word to the discussion. It seemed like he was content to just observe the proceedings without interfering.

Oh, Ling Xiao, *this* is the military you dedicated your life to, the country you gave your life to protect — did you ever dream that they would betray your trust and abandon your flesh and blood for their own interests? Are you regretting your choice now in the afterlife?

Lan Luofeng could not suppress the contempt she felt any longer. She said, "So this is the government. So this is the military... I finally understand."

Perhaps sensing the deep mockery behind Lan Luofeng's words, the smiles on the two representatives' faces froze.

"If that's how it is, I, Lan Luofeng, would like a promise from the government and the military. Regardless of whether my child Ling Lan inherits his father Ling Xiao's military privileges, he shall be emancipated from the Ling family, and shall no longer be connected to the Ling family in any way."

The two representatives looked at each other, but it was the military representative who spoke up in the end. "What do you mean?"

Lan Luofeng smiled chillingly. "If Ling Lan inherits, all the other Ling family members must immediately leave Doha and go back to where they came from... If Ling Lan does not inherit, Ling Lan and I shall leave Doha instead. No matter what the outcome, the both of us shall no longer be part of the Ling family."

For a long while, Lan Luofeng had already intended to settle things with the Ling family. If she could clear this forever with one stroke, her efforts in securing this situation would be well worth it.

Ling Suren's face twisted in anger. "Lan Luofeng, have you gone mad?"

"Why, Uncle Ren, are you afraid? Afraid that the child you chose will not be able to beat Ling Lan?" Lan Luofeng was all smiles as she faced Ling Suren, one of her hands lightly covering Ling Lan's tiny chubby fingers. This was probably what a mother's strength referred to — Lan Luofeng had never felt as steady as she was now.

Ling Suren was speechless. Although he had been full of confidence just a while back, Lan Luofeng's aggressive manner had shaken him, and doubt started to creep into his mind. He was afraid to take the risk.

As if sensing Ling Suren's hesitation, another Ling family elder who was standing beside him whispered, "Beware a bluff."

Hearing this, Ling Suren centred himself. That's right, Lan Luofeng must be bluffing out of desperation. If Ling Lan's body stats and potential were really that impressive, why would Lan Luofeng seal away the records? After all, the higher Ling Lan's potential, the more secure his inheritance — a smart person would never seal away those records, but would instead shout it from the rooftops to drive away other challengers.

Chapter 8

Comparison of Assessments

The more Ling Suren thought about it, the surer he was of his suspicions. Gaining confidence, he sneered, saying, "Since Mrs. Ling Xiao has so decided, we, the Ling family, shall not force you both to stay. The whereabouts and future actions of Ling Lan shall be none of our business."

"If Ling Lan inherits, the Ling family will have to move out of Doha within a months time — Uncle Ren, I hope you will not blame me for my ruthlessness when that happens?" Lan Luofeng raised a brow as her eyes flicked towards the two representatives, reminding Ling Suren that both the government and the military would be witness to this agreement — there would be no way for the Ling family to renege on their word.

Facing such an aggressive Lan Luofeng, Ling Suren exploded in anger, "And if Ling Lan doesn't inherit, can I also request that you both leave Doha within a month?"

Lan Luofeng smiled icily. "I wouldn't ask this if I wasn't willing to do it myself. Could it be that the Ling family is too afraid to take this risk? Are you even more cowardly than a woman like me? Of course, if you are willing to give up on the inheritance, I can be merciful and let you all continue to remain in Doha."

Lan Luofeng's offer served two purposes. One, by taking a step back, she could force Ling Suren to state his decision clearly, so the Ling family would have no way to feign ignorance later. Two, she also wanted to give the Ling family one last chance — if they could control their greed, they would still be able to remain in Doha for another twenty odd years, which Lan Luofeng believed would be more than enough time for them to cultivate an outstanding operator of their own and secure their position in Doha.

However, Lan Luofeng's words only served to cement Ling Suren's suspicions that this was just a desperate gambit on her part. Thus, without any reservations, he sneered coldly in response, "Since you are so stubborn, alright, the Ling family agrees to your terms. As you said, if Ling Lan inherits, the Ling family shall leave Doha. If the child we chose inherits, then Ling Lan will have to leave Doha. He shall never be able to enter

Doha within his lifetime, and shall not be allowed to enter any military system of the nation." These stipulations would utterly destroy any chance of Ling Lan gaining rank, and would prevent an adult Ling Lan from ever returning in the name of vengeance.

Hearing this, Lan Luofeng felt hatred grow within her heart. It had been foolish of her to feel sorry for them, to try and give them a way out. What the Ling family suggested was utterly ruthless — if Ling Lan had truly been a boy, the Ling family's requests would have ruined his future, forcing him to toil away his life in the working class. The little mercy she had felt for them was now completely snuffed out, and her eyes were cold as she said, "Very well! As you wish."

Lan Luofeng called for a servant to prepare an assessment device, but was stopped by Ling Suren. He turned to the military representative, "The military must have brought an assessment device over for this visit. If you please?"

Lan Luofeng let him do as he liked. She had no intention of tampering with the device to begin with, and even if she had, she would not be so foolish as to do it in front of the military representative.

The military representative did not refuse Ling Suren's request. This fit in nicely with their goals after all. In terms of getting accurate data, the military's assessment devices were naturally much more reliable than the ones available for public use.

In short order, a top-of-the-line assessment device had been brought in by military troops.

Meanwhile, in her mother's arms, Ling Lan was frantically going over the situation with Little Four.

"Will they be able to determine my gender? Or discover your existence?" asked Ling Lan anxiously. If either of those secrets were discovered, she would have to leave this place with her mother, and although she did not know what the outside world was like, the impression she got from Ling Suren and Lan Luofeng's conversation was that life outside could not compare to life here.

Moreover, although Ling Lan was not afraid of suffering, she felt that she should naturally inherit her father's premium military benefits as her father's child. Why should a wild child who sprang out of nowhere get to inherit what belonged to her by right?

That's right, Ling Lan was still thinking based on the logic she had developed on Earth ten thousand years ago. Inheritance by blood was clear-cut back then, so she really could not understand this current situation. As such, she refused to give up. She would definitely be the one to inherit Ling Xiao's premium military benefits.

Little Four's tone was full of disdain. *"As if a device which has yet to develop artificial intelligence would be able to thwart me? Don't worry, even if it could assess gender, I can change the data to reflect that you are male."*

Ling Lan was struck by Little Four's cocky tone. *"Little Four, do you have the ability to change the assessment results as you like?"*

Little Four became exceedingly smug. *"Of course! When you were first assessed, if I hadn't covered for you, your spiritual power would have exploded that assessment device."*

Exploded? Why did that word sound so ominous to Ling Lan? Before Ling Lan could ponder on it any further, she heard the military representative ask, "Who's first?"

Lan Luofeng tightened her arms around Ling Lan, face expressionless as she said, "Let the Ling family's child be tested first."

Ling Suren assumed that Lan Luofeng was just intending to delay the inevitable, and did not want to waste words arguing with her. He nodded and motioned for the woman by his side to place the child in her arms into the assessment device.

Soon, the child's results were presented:

Physical Fitness: [S] rank!

Spiritual Power: Tier-1!

Potential: [A+] rank!

Assessment overview: Excellent; heavy cultivation recommended.

Seeing these results, the military representative's entire bearing changed — this child was definitely worthy of heavy cultivation by the military. A child with [A+] rank potential had a certain chance of becoming an IN mecha operator, albeit a small one, but having any degree of probability was better than none.

Ling Suren was very satisfied with the military representative's reaction. As he had expected, this child was an undeniable lure for the military. However, he showed none of this satisfaction on his face but turned calmly to face Lan Luofeng and said, "Mrs. Ling Xiao, there is still time, if you take back your words now and surrender the inheritance, the Ling family shall raise Ling Lan with the utmost care."

Pretending to be a good Samaritan after going to all this trouble to rob a child of his inheritance? In his dreams!

Lan Luofeng said mockingly, "That won't be necessary. I just hope all of you will move speedily when leaving Doha."

So saying, she walked over to the assessment device and carefully placed Ling Lan inside it.

By this time, Ling Lan and Little Four had come to an agreement to maintain the original assessment results. At first, Little Four had still been a little worried that the other child's results might be better than Ling Lan's, and had struggled over how he could secretly increase Ling Lan's stats, but after seeing these results, Little Four was reassured.

Just like that, Ling Lan's sealed results were revealed.

Physical Fitness: [S] rank!

Spiritual Power: Tier-2!

Potential: [S] rank!

Assessment overview: Excellent; all out cultivation recommended.

In the end, Little Four had still not been able to resist tweaking the results a little. The original recommendation of 'focused' cultivation was upgraded to 'all out' cultivation. Little Four was extremely pleased with himself — take that! 'All out' was way better than 'heavy'!

In reality, even if Little Four had not changed anything, the results would still be the same. The moment these results were presented, the representatives from both the military and the government decided unanimously that Ling Xiao's premium military benefits would be inherited by Ling Lan.

The decisiveness of the two representatives was primarily due to the assessment of Ling Lan's potential. Although the other stats were also important, those stats could be improved later on, while potential was innate and had a direct correlation with a child's room for growth. Although the gap between an [A+] rank and an [S] rank seemed negligible, in the long run, the difference would reveal itself to be extremely significant — an [S] rank had a 5 to 10 percent higher chance of becoming an IN mecha operator.

Based on this point alone, Ling Lan truly deserved 'all out cultivation' from the military.

Lan Luofeng finally let out a sigh of relief. Although she had had confidence in Ling Lan, she still couldn't help but feel a little unsettled before the results were confirmed.

By this time, Ling Suren could not help but know that he had fallen into Lan Luofeng's trap. His face flushed with anger, and he sorely wished that he could slice Lan Luofeng up into little pieces. On the other hand, Lan Luofeng faced him fearlessly. The Ling family would never have the guts to make a move with the two official representatives here.

Lan Luofeng said shortly, "Ling Suren, you know the way out!" Since she had already decided to cut all ties with the Ling family, there was no point in forcing herself to make nice with them anymore.

"Hmph, let us go!" Seeing the disdain on most of the visitors' faces, Ling Suren knew that they had overstayed their welcome. There was no reason to linger, so he took his men and left.

Chapter 9

Gene Stimulating Agent!

Another five months went by, and like any other infant, the six-month old Ling Lan could finally flip over and had started her evolution into a crawling creature. Ling Lan felt that her tongue was still uncooperative though, only allowing her to utter lone syllables — even so, her mother Lan Luofeng was overjoyed. Compared to other children, Ling Lan was already very articulate, and Lan Luofeng felt as if she could almost understand what Ling Lan wanted to say.

Ling Lan was almost moved to tears — she could finally make it known to her mother when she needed to go to the restroom. During this time frame, despite her best efforts, she had had trouble communicating with her mother who was on a different wavelength, resulting in several unfortunate accidents... causing her no end of embarrassment for having wet the bed again after twenty seven years of life.

Well alright, let's just put aside all those shameful matters that happened in the past six months. There were too many to mention, and Ling Lan did not want to think about them anymore. She had decided that she would wipe this period of life from her memories.

This day, the moment she woke up, Ling Lan felt something different in the air. Chamberlain Ling Qin's expression was tight, and her mom had dressed her with special care, helping her put on special underpants that would hide her secret from any angle.

Ling Lan felt that the underpants were really quite comfortable... well, if she could ignore the two soft spherical pseudo-testicles inside.

Not long after, several strangers in British-military uniforms suddenly descended upon the Ling household.

Ling Lan observed the men in shock. She did not know if all soldiers who returned from war had the same imposing presence, but Ling Lan could keenly sense the honed edges hidden under those uniforms. This was most certainly a troop of combat-savvy, blood-soaked, veteran soldiers.

Ling Lan put on a blank face and pretended to play by herself, but she kept her ears wide open. She was extremely thankful that the family she was born into ten thousand years later was still Chinese, and that the language being spoken was still Mandarin. This allowed her to skip having to learn a new language and meant she could gather information from others' conversation even as a baby.

When the troops introduced themselves to her mother, Ling Lan finally understood. They were here to deliver the premium military benefits Ling Lan had inherited, and would continue to do so every six months from now on.

This was also the day that Ling Lan found out what the premium military benefits actually were. A large part of those benefits were gene stimulating agents which were used to raise potential and body stats.

There were four grades of gene stimulating agents available on the market, from grade-1 to grade-4. Grade-4 agents were the worst, while grade-1 agents were the best. This grading was based on the purity of the gene stimulating agent. Grade-4 stimulating agents had a purity of 30%, grade-3 had 45%, grade-2 60%, and grade-1 75%. The higher the purity of the stimulating agent, the less harm it did to the body — it would allow the user to absorb most of the agent, and hence receive a higher boost to his potential and body stats.

Therefore, the more agent a child's body could absorb, the better his development would be, building up the solid foundations necessary for potential IN mecha operators.

However, these gene stimulating agents were horrifyingly expensive. Let's put it this way — a commoner's hard-earned life savings may only be enough to afford one bottle of the lowest grade gene stimulating agent. To get an agent just one grade higher, the price would have to be multiplied by ten. As you can imagine, grade-1 gene stimulating agents could only be afforded by those with either great power or great wealth, while the rest of the common people could only look on in envy.

Of course, this didn't mean that there was no chance at all for commoners to receive better resources. Every newborn child could be assessed at a public assessment centre and receive one of six rankings from the assessment.

Those assessed as [F] rank would not receive any aid from the government. Until their bodies were unable to absorb any more agent, [D] rank babies could receive two

bottles of grade-4 gene stimulating agent per year, [C] ranks could receive two bottles of grade-3 agent per year, and [B] ranks could receive two bottles of grade-2 agent per year.

Meanwhile, [A] rank babies had two options. They could accept two bottles of grade-1 agent per year and grow up freely, or enter the military and receive organised military training and receive an endless supply of grade-1 agent. However, with the latter choice, the child would have to spend his entire life serving the military.

[S] rank babies would be immediately taken away for specialised training by the military, but the possibility of that happening was extremely low. As mentioned previously, this formidable ranking very rarely appeared among commoner children — in a nutshell, genetics decided everything.

Meanwhile, someone like Ling Lan who inherited premium military benefits was entitled to the premium-grade gene stimulating agents kept for central military use. These agents were even purer than the agents available on the market, almost reaching 90% purity. This was the best the military could do at the moment, since research on agents had hit a plateau. True 90% purity was just out of reach, but no one had been able to make the final step.

This time around, the military had sent over a whole ten tubes of premium-grade agent. Because these ten tubes were worth cities, the military had no choice but to send out some of their ace mechas as an escort.

Very quickly, Ling Lan had been stripped down to her special underpants. One of the men who seemed like a military doctor took out a long syringe with a sharp needle from a box he was carrying, and then used it to draw out the gene stimulating agent from one of the tubes.

Ling Lan turned a blind eye to all of this. That was all she could do — which six-month old baby knew to be afraid? At this moment, Ling Lan was grateful for her experience with needles. During her past illness, she had been injected so many times every day that she had become numb to the sight of needles, which was why she could face these injections so calmly now.

The syringe was rapidly plunged into her arm. The military doctor was very skilled — Ling Lan only felt a slight sting and an itch as the needle went in, very much like a mosquito bite.

The military doctor pushed the agent into Ling Lan's arm gradually, his demeanour stern as he observed Ling Lan's reactions. Some babies were incompatible with the agent, and there were also some babies who had been shown to have allergic reactions. In short, the greatest care must be taken when giving a baby their first shot of gene stimulating agent to avoid any accidents.

Before Ling Lan could sense any difference, Little Four had already rushed to the forefront of her mind without any warning.

"I sense something delicious! It's a taste I know well! No, that's not right, something's different... yuck, what is this trash?! Why does it have impurities? This affects the taste too much!" Little Four was very unhappy. It felt that it had been tricked.

Hearing Little Four's voice, Ling Lan hurriedly closed her eyes. They say the eyes are the windows to the soul, right? She would live to regret it if anyone noticed anything strange from her eyes. Ling Lan said huffily, *"Why did you come out?"*

Little Four felt wronged. It had thought that the great thing in its memories had appeared, only to be presented with this knockoff. It said sadly, *"I thought something great had appeared, but it's just a knockoff. There are so many impurities inside... if left uncleaned, your body will be harmed."*

Hearing that it was harmful, Ling Lan asked anxiously, *"Little Four, can you clean it for me?"*

Little Four perked up immediately at her words, and said smugly, *"Of course I can, who do you think I am? I am the smartest king mecha learning device from the Mandora star system! I can help my contractor do many things, such as expel any harmful substances from the body."*

Ling Lan chose to ignore Little Four's self-aggrandizement, asking in confusion, *"If this thing is harmful to the body, then why do the people here want to inject it into babies?"*

"This is actually a great thing which can improve your body stats and potential. It's just that the technology here seems to be unable to achieve 100% purity, which is why there are impurities remaining which will harm the body. However, even so, the benefits still outweigh the costs. The only thing is that this agent cannot be absorbed indefinitely, because once the impurities have accumulated in the body to a certain degree, the body will lose the ability to absorb any more agent," explained Little Four.

Ling Lan was relieved. As long as the outcome was good, and there was no danger to her health, she would still be able to accept it. Besides, Little Four had already promised to clear out those impurities.

Very quickly, the first tube of agent had been absorbed by Ling Lan, and the military doctor started injecting the second, and then the third... by the time the military doctor picked up the eighth tube, his forehead was beaded with sweat, and his hands, which had remained steady so far, actually trembled a little.

Chapter 10

Absorb Everything!

The military doctor could not be faulted for losing his composure. Even the very rare [SS] rank babies could only absorb up to seven tubes of premium-grade agent. This time around, the military had brought over ten tubes merely as a show of respect toward Major General Ling Xiao's inheritor. The military had believed that no matter how outstanding Major General Ling Xiao's inheritor was, six tubes would have been more than enough, but Ling Lan just had to be an oddball who showed no signs of absorption satiation even at the eighth tube.

The eighth tube of agent was injected into Ling Lan, and the process was as smooth as ever. When a body started to become satiated, it could be felt in the injection process. If the process was unhindered, that meant that the body could still continue to absorb more agent; but if the process seemed impeded, this indicated that the body was nearing satiation. If the agent could no longer be injected, then it meant that the body was already satiated and could no longer absorb any additional agent.

Watching as Ling Lan successfully absorbed the eighth tube of agent, the military doctor's calm expression finally changed. With his back towards Lan Luofeng and Ling Qin, he threw a meaningful glance at his assistant beside him, signalling him to go contact their superiors.

The military doctor felt that he had done it subtly enough, but his actions had unfortunately still been captured by Ling Lan. Of course, the military doctor didn't think to worry about Ling Lan, for how much could a six-month old babe understand? What he didn't know was that an oddball such as Ling Lan existed in the world, an oddball who could think like an adult from birth.

Seeing the military doctor's actions, Ling Lan knew that something wasn't right. Afraid that her absorption rate may be a little overboard, Ling Lan hurriedly asked Little Four, *"Little Four, something doesn't seem right. It looks like we may be absorbing too much agent... why don't we stop here?"*

Having had a taste of the agent, Little Four was unwilling to just stop. He reassured Ling Lan, *"Don't worry! Didn't they bring over ten tubes? Since they brought so many,*

they must have expected that you would be able to absorb that much..." Little Four felt that his logic was impeccable.

Ling Lan was still doubtful. *"Are you sure? What if they just wanted to be prepared? Maybe only demonic babies can absorb that much. We have just started out, it wouldn't hurt to keep a lower profile."* Ling Lan assumed correctly, but what she didn't know was that unfortunately, even if they stopped now, it was already too late.

Little Four was still unwilling to just give up. This agent was good stuff! It would help get rid of the hidden danger threatening his host. So after some thought, he decided to focus on the present and think about the other things later, and said, *"I will arrange some cover-up during the tenth tube and make it look like your body is getting satiated, so even if your absorption rate is a little out of the ordinary, it still shouldn't arouse any suspicion. At the most, you'll only get a little more attention as you grow up, and we can pull back the rate gradually in future so that the impact of this first time is lessened."*

Before Ling Lan could argue, Little Four continued, *"You should know, absorbing these ten tubes of agent will not only greatly multiply the efficiency of your training, but will also eliminate your hidden trouble once and for all, so you will never have to worry about your spiritual power overwhelming your physical body ever again."*

"Huh? Didn't you say that my Qi exercises would resolve the issue in two years anyway? What are you hiding from me?" Ling Lan finally sensed that Little Four was not telling her the full story.

Little Four froze, realizing that it had slipped up, and finally admitted, *"What I meant was that if your spiritual power does not increase, your problems would be solved in two years. But you must understand, even if you don't train it, your spiritual power will still increase as you grow older."*

Ling Lan was exasperated. *"How could you not tell me this? Don't you know how dangerous this is?"*

Little Four looked up towards the heavens and mused with an innocent look on its face, *"I didn't tell you? It must have slipped my mind..."*

Ling Lan sorely wished that she could grab the little rascal and give him a good spanking. Sadly, she had already promised never to use domestic violence, so she could only put away her twitching palms. Suspiciously, she wondered — had the little

rascal foreseen this day, and so had made her promise from the start to avoid violence?

She took several deep breaths to calm herself down before asking, *"Tell me honestly, in these six months, how much has my spiritual power grown?"* Even if she were to die, Ling Lan wanted to know how she died, so she wouldn't end up as a befuddled ghost.

"Actually, it's only grown this much..." Little Four indicated with his short and stubby fingers how truly little Ling Lan's spiritual power had grown.

"Since it's only that much, does that mean there is no danger?" Ling Lan asked with a sneer, now holding very little faith in the deceitful little rascal.

Little Four wilted and said uneasily, *"If it weren't for the agents this time, you would have fallen greatly ill in two years' time. However, as long as you continued your Qi exercises, I estimated that you would have completely recovered after three more years of practice. But now that we have this agent, all the hidden problems are solved, so there will no longer be any trouble."* Having said that, he grinned cheekily, satisfaction plainly written on its face. It did not seem to be concerned about how badly things could have gone if they hadn't received the agent.

Seeing this, Ling Lan gave up in resignation. If she tried to argue seriously with the little rascal she would just drive herself mad. Still, she gave a stern warning to Little Four — no matter what happened from now on, he must tell her everything. She wanted no more of these half-truths.

Little Four was quick to agree, but whether he would really live up to his word Ling Lan couldn't tell.

Honestly, Ling Lan felt that something was off with Little Four — even though he claimed to be her contracted long-term companion, she did not have the authority to access the learning space's study programmes on her own. That is, if Little Four did not allow it, she would not be able to open the mental doors that represented those courses in her mindscape.

If Ling Lan were someone else, she might have fretted over this, or may even suspect the learning device of having ulterior motives. However, Ling Lan was very tolerant. If she couldn't open it, then she couldn't open it. There was no need to push. It was nice enough to have someone to shoot the breeze with when she was bored.

At heart, Ling Lan did not have any ambitions to lord over other people. All she wanted

to do was live — safely, freely, and painlessly.

In short order, the assistant had returned from giving his report. He nodded lightly at the military doctor, indicating that he should continue with the injections.

Having received approval from the superiors, the military doctor continued injecting without worry. He had honestly been taken aback by Ling Lan's insane absorption rate, but had also been troubled over how he could account for the excess injections used to his superiors.

Finally, at the tenth tube, the military doctor finally felt more and more resistance as he continued to push the plunger. In the end, he could no longer inject any more agent when there were only a few drops left in the barrel.

Only then did the military doctor pull out the needle, secretly dabbing away the sweat on his forehead. Luckily this child had been satisfied with this tenth shot, letting them complete their mission successfully. A child who could absorb ten tubes of agent was not unheard of, but it was definitely very uncommon.

The military people did not linger, leaving after a brisk farewell, leaving behind a bewildered Lan Luofeng and a slightly knowing Ling Qin.

Ling Lan's gaze tracked the soldiers as they left, and she finally relaxed. And then, she registered a heavy weight in her bladder... she was dismayed. She hadn't even had much milk to drink since her mum knew that she would be given agent to absorb, so why did she have the uncontrollable urge to pee?

As if sensing Ling Lan's distress, Little Four said sheepishly, *"I was afraid the military people would notice, so I didn't dare to expel the impurities through your sweat glands, but instead directed them to your bladder..."*

In other words, with all the impurities gathered there, it would be even more surprising if she didn't need to pee.

Ling Lan didn't even have the chance to yell for her mother before she tragically wet the bed once again...

"Little Four, you're dead meat!" wailed Ling Lan.

God dammit! It had taken so long for her to regain some sense of dignity, and appeal to others as a lovable and angelic baby. But those joyous days had barely begun before they were ruined by this inconsiderate Little Four.

Ling Lan was saddened once again. Especially when she heard her mum smack her bum lightly, teasing her for wetting the bed again, she felt the world around her grow dim in despair.

Chapter 11

Learning System Activated!

That afternoon, on the Planet of Doha, in the chief's office in the logistics headquarters of the first military regiment of the Federation, a young officer was reporting to the Chief of Central Logistics on the urgent news delivered today.

"Chief, it has been confirmed that there is nothing wrong with Doctor Mu's report. The reports of the six mecha pilot escorts match up with his report perfectly," reported the young officer, flipping through the notes in his hands as he stood respectfully facing his seated superior.

Behind the desk flipping through another set of notes sat an energetic middle-aged General. He nodded as he listened, before asking, "How many people know about this?"

The young officer paused for a moment, stunned by the unexpected question, but he quickly recovered and answered, "Chief, this matter was handled by me personally. Other than my assistant and I, and those directly involved, no one else in the military is aware of the details."

"Very good. Designate the information on Major General Ling Xiao's inheritor as S-class — those below the rank of general are not allowed to access it. Also, put out a gag order for those who already know of the matter. As for the follow-up on that inheritor, let the same group of men be in charge of it."

"Yes! Chief." The young officer saluted and left the office with his orders.

Alone in the now empty office, the middle-aged General sighed softly, "Ling Xiao, this is all I can do for your child. Hopefully he doesn't attract the attention of anyone else in the military."

Ling Lan was very lucky. Completely unbeknownst to her, a certain someone had taken special care to protect her so that she would not be controlled by the military and be

forced to become a fighting machine. What this gave her was time — precious time to grow up and enjoy her childhood.

However, at this moment, Ling Lan had no thought to spare for how the military wanted to treat her. Although she had been worried that her unusual absorption rate would attract the military's attention, after ten peaceful days of nothing happening, she had put it out of her mind and moved on to do other things.

She had always been an optimistic girl, which was why she had managed to survive twenty-four years of unbearable pain with her sanity intact.

Of course, another reason why Ling Lan had put away her concerns about the military so quickly was the fact her attention had been drawn away by some wonderful news.

Early this morning, Little Four had announced, with great aplomb, that she was now qualified to access the learning mind-space.

In Little Four's mind-space, a spacious circular hall was Ling Lan's entry point. Surrounding her were a circle of tightly sealed doors. Ling Lan had tried to open some of them, but every single one had been shut tight, and would not budge no matter what she did.

After Little Four had had his fun watching her make a fool of herself, he had explained that the doors would not open until she met specific learning requirements. As for the details of those requirements, Little Four refused to say and had given her no hint at all.

However, Ling Lan still had a good guess that the requirements had to do with her physical fitness, as Little Four had reminded her more than once to work hard on her training.

Knowing that this was not up to chance, Ling Lan suppressed her burgeoning curiosity and settled down to focus on her regular training. This would not only aid her in her quest to eliminate the hidden threat to her health, but it might also provide her with the key to accessing the materials hidden behind the doors of Little Four's learning space.

In truth, Ling Lan was only approaching this matter with such urgency because she was completely bored out of her mind. Every day she just lay in bed, eating and sleeping, sleeping and eating... or else she was playing on her own. These days as a

baby were just too boring to endure. Even when she had been bedridden in her past life, she had at least been able to go online and surf the net to relieve her boredom, or perhaps even read some novels or whatnot...

Of course, the other reason why Ling Lan was feeling suffocated was that her mom was being extra vigilant in fears that her secret would be exposed. Her mom did not even dare to take her outside, much less take her visiting. As a result, Ling Lan had unfortunately spent the seven months since she had been born in only three places — this bedroom, the grand hall, and the balcony — giving her no chance to truly observe this strange new world.

Just when Ling Lan thought that she was going to go crazy from boredom, Little Four showed up with the good news, making her so happy she could cry.

And so Ling Lan was on her best behaviour today. After being fed by her mother, she did not fuss to be taken outside as usual, but instead quickly went to sleep (which was in fact entering into the mind-space created by Little Four).

This time, when Ling Lan entered the mind-space, she noticed that the space had changed a little since she had last been there. This little change was a great source of joy to Ling Lan.

Among the many tightly sealed doors, one door was shining with an eye-catching red light. On the surface of the door, two large Chinese words could be seen — Physical Skills!

By her side, Little Four explained, "I have updated the language system so that it now uses your current writing system and verbal language, so you won't have any trouble understanding it."

Ling Lan was so touched by this that she pulled Little Four over and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek in gratitude.

Little Four blushed, turning completely red, and starting to mumble bashfully, "Don't think you can win me over by being nice! I, Little Four, am an upstanding being, I will never go against my principles no matter what..."

Oh, Little Four. As you're saying this, can you not wriggle your butt around? And while we're at it, the corners of your lips are quirked a little too high, aren't they...? His words had no credibility whatsoever.

Ling Lan did not notice Little Four's mumbling — all her attention had been taken up by the door before her. She slowly walked up to the door and gave it a good shove, and the door swung open.

Ling Lan did not hesitate. She walked right in, and the open door slammed shut behind her.

Suddenly, the room went dark. Ling Lan was shocked by this sudden turn of events, and shouted out, "Little Four, where are you?"

Little Four's voice did not ring out through the darkness. All was silent around her, and the room was as dark as before. The eerie combination of darkness and silence caused Ling Lan's heart to pound violently, but she fought the instinctual terror and stood still, deciding to wait it out. She had faith that Little Four would never harm her.

Ling Lan did not know how long she waited, for in the dark silence, time stretched endlessly, making the wait feel much longer than it really was. After a while, the cloistered darkness made Ling Lan recall her time as a fetus, and her rapid heartbeat started slowing gradually until it returned to normal. She shut her eyes and tried to remember how it felt to be within her mother's body, and was suffused with a tranquil calmness. Her fear and anxiety faded, and she entered a semi-conscious semi-dreamlike state...

After an indeterminate amount of time, Ling Lan abruptly sensed that the dark world around her had become awash with light. She squinted at the sudden brightness, and slowly surfaced from the depths of her inner calm.

As her eyesight adjusted to the light, Ling Lan found that she was standing in an open square. The area was as large as a football field, no, even larger. Ling Lan felt very small in this wide expanse of space.

Right then, a slightly mechanical voice spoke tonelessly from behind her, "Psychological resilience [SSS] rank. Highest level of physical skill training authorised."

Apparently, the beginning was just another test. The system had been evaluating her psychological resilience based on her reaction — if she had reacted too badly, the system would have kicked her out and made her try again another time. On the other hand, if she did well enough to pass, the system would assign a ranking based on her

score, which would be used to determine what level of training she'd be subjected to.

Of course, even if Ling Lan's performance was terrible, the system would still have allowed her to start learning the most basic level of physical skill training eventually, but her training would have been inevitably delayed. It should be noted that the earlier a contractor can learn the skills available in the mind-space, the better — which is why the Mandora star system chose to have newborn babes bound to these learning devices.

Still, what the child can accomplish in the end is also dependent on his innate qualities. A heaven-blessed genius would be able to achieve much more by completing the courses provided by the learning system, becoming more and more outstanding, while a mediocre talent may just while away in mediocrity... if the learning system is activated too late, the difference in levels would be impossible to bridge.

Undeniably, Ling Lan had the great advantage of having two lives worth of experience, netting her the highest psychological resilience ranking of [SSS] from the system at first try. But we should also remember to shed a tear for Ling Lan — true to its name, the highest level of physical skill training was not an easy course to master... it looked like Ling Lan would soon be living a miserable life of being tormented by the system.

Ling Lan spun her head around to look for the source of the sudden voice and saw a uniformed male soldier standing there, eyes cold as he observed her.

Don't ask Ling Lan how she knew the man was a soldier — it was a gut feeling. Ling Lan felt as if he were an unsheathed sword, sharp and precise, and she found it difficult to breathe just from being under the pressure of his gaze.

Chapter 12

Tests Could Be Anywhere

Ling Lan gulped silently and tried to remain calm as she asked, "Will you be teaching me physical skills?" Ling Lan was extremely interested in learning these skills. In her previous life she had been mostly confined to a bed, but now that she had a healthy body, she wanted to learn as much as could so that this great body of hers was not wasted.

The man remained expressionless, replying flatly, "No, I am just here to introduce the skill paths you may choose."

Ling Lan exhaled in relief yet couldn't help but feel a little disappointed. Although facing the man was extremely stressful, like a mountain pressing upon her making it hard to breathe, this also meant that he was very formidable. If he had been her teacher, she would certainly have benefitted greatly.

The man paid no mind to Ling Lan's conflicted feelings, but continued by introducing himself. "You may call me Number One."

Number One? Was that a codename? Could it be that in this learning space, all the instructors had no names but only went by codenames? Was it because names were unnecessary? Or was there some other reason?

Number One continued, "As follows, I will introduce the options you have under the highest level of physical skills training. There are three sets — the Offensive Series, the Balanced Series, and the Defensive Series."

Ling Lan listened very attentively as this choice would affect her entire life. She could not afford to be careless.

"The Offensive Series, as its name implies, will cover the physical skills necessary in building a foundation for forceful offensive attacks. The Balanced Series will cover foundational physical skills suitable for a mixture of offence and defence, while the Defensive Series will focus on defence. Each contractor may only choose one set to practise." Number One seemed satisfied with Ling Lan's serious attitude as he further

explained, "These three foundation physical skill sets cannot be practised simultaneously, or else the body will be greatly damaged."

Ling Lan was startled — she had indeed been considering the ambitious idea of learning more than one set, and she had not expected Number One to see through her intentions and warn her. Gratefully, she said, "Thank you, Instructor Number One!"

Although Number One had said that he would not be her instructor, Ling Lan sincerely felt that Number One was strong enough to be anyone's instructor, and thus deserved the title.

Number One seemed a little taken aback by Ling Lan's manner of address, but quickly brushed it off. In his usual flat tone, he asked, "Which set will you pick?"

Ling Lan considered the three sets. Honestly, Ling Lan was drawn towards the Balanced Series — since it covered both offence and defence, this meant that the set had no obvious weaknesses, while the other two sets had very distinct advantages and disadvantages. Ling Lan did not plan to become a master practitioner, but only wanted to strengthen her body. Just as she was about to answer, a flash of inspiration caused her to say instead, "Instructor Number One, I would like to hear your recommendation. Which set would work best for me?"

Number One's gaze turned sharp — his focused gaze was like a dagger flying straight at her, but Ling Lan's face still held a neutral smile, as if she felt none of Number One's rage.

The two of them stared at each other. The pressure coming from Number One grew heavier and heavier. Though Ling Lan still looked calm on the surface, she was already quaking in her bones. She desperately encouraged herself to hang in there, telling herself that she just needed to hold on a little bit longer.

Finally, Ling Lan prevailed. Number One dialled back his killer gaze, and an almost indiscernible smile flitted across his face. Ling Lan's heart settled — she knew she had made the right choice.

As expected, Number One gave her his recommendation. "I recommend you choose the Defensive Series!"

In truth, the presence of Number One was not so simple as to just introduce the sets to the contractors. He was actually another one of the examiners. From his very first

sentence, he had begun misleading the contractors, giving contractors the false impression that they were free to choose any of the three physical skill sets he described.

Of course, once a contractor had chosen, Number One would also allow said contractor to practise that set of physical skills. The problem was, had the contractor really chosen the set that was suitable for him?

In the first place, the learning devices had been designed to nurture excellence in outstanding talents. Although this lucky shot-in-the-dark method of choosing could still result in several prodigies, it did not fit in with the original intentions of the learning devices...

As such, the only valid explanation was that this was all still a test. A test which assessed the observational skills and logical reasoning of the contractors. Anyone with a little smarts would have noticed — did a simple introduction of the physical skill sets really require the presence of such a formidable instructor as Number One? This was obviously illogical.

Naturally, Ling Lan wasn't that smart. She had not noticed this little logical flaw, but had in fact been truly fooled. However, she was very clear on one point, and that was that Number One was very strong. Moreover, she believed that no one knew the pros and cons of the three physical skill sets better than Number One. And since there was such an impressive instructor right in front of her, wouldn't it be a waste not to ask him for some advice?

Thus, Ling Lan decided to ask Number One at that crucial moment. In this almost accidental manner, Ling Lan stumbled her way past another test. It had to be said that Ling Lan was really very lucky.

Since Number One had given his recommendation, Ling Lan naturally did not presume to think she could choose any better, and she quickly selected the Defensive Series of physical skills to learn.

Once Ling Lan verbally acknowledged her selection of the Defensive Series, the scenery in front of Ling Lan's eyes changed. At this point, Number One had disappeared, and the person in front of her was now a delicate-looking female soldier. The soldier smiled and said, "Hello. For this period of time, I shall be responsible for your training. You may call me Number Nine!"

This self-proclaimed Number Nine female soldier had a rather slim figure and did not possess the strong aura and thick sense of bloodshed that Number One did. Her strength was of a more introverted type — the description 'still as a statue, movement as a wild hare' ¹ described her perfectly.

Ling Lan believed that, in a fight, this female warrior would probably be able to defeat a hulking brute with just one move. She called out respectfully, "Instructor Number Nine, please take care of me."

Number Nine did not say anything more but immediately started doing several stretching exercises, indicating for Ling Lan to repeat them after her.

Ling Lan found that although these few moves seemed easy, they were actually not. They stretched each part of the human body to its extreme, with the clear purpose of increasing the body's flexibility. These moves had some similarity with the popular yoga from 10000 years ago, giving Ling Lan a strange sense of déjà vu.

This set of moves had a total of nine stances. After Number Nine performed them three times, she noticed that Ling Lan had memorized all of them. Without giving Ling Lan any chance for questions, she sent Ling Lan's consciousness back to the main study hall with a flick of her finger.

Ling Lan was struck dizzy by the unexpected blow. She wrapped her hands around her head and squatted, staying still as she waited for the dizziness to pass. As it slowly faded, she found that Little Four, who had been out here waiting for all this time, had worried himself sick over her. He was spinning in circles around her, trying to see if she was alright.

"I'm fine, Little Four. Just a little tired. I need to go out and rest a little." Ling Lan squeezed out a smile with some effort to reassure Little Four. She felt as if her spiritual and mental energy had been drained, and was so tired that she just really wanted to sleep.

She quickly said goodbye to Little Four, returned to her physical body, and fell into a deep sleep, for real this time.

Dead to the world, Ling Lan did not know that the anxious Little Four secretly used his energy to help Ling Lan activate her Qi circulation. He did so over and over again until her Qi started circulating on its own. Only then did Little Four stop and keep away

his energy.

After doing this, Little Four's image in the learning space became much dimmer...

Chapter 13

Car or Plane?

Recently, Lan Luofeng had been mired in a conflicted sense of joy. These days, her baby was no longer visiting the sandman every time she wasn't eating.

However, before she could be happy about that for long, her conflict began — her baby had somehow become fascinated with a strange curled position.

Now, there was nothing wrong with the curled position... but whenever she saw her baby's two little feet used as bolsters hugged between her little hands against her little head, Lan Luofeng couldn't help but twitch internally and feel a phantom pain in her bones — this position was definitely not something her old bones could achieve.

If it wasn't for the fact that Ling Lan was smiling like an idiot the whole time, so she knew that the position was not difficult at all for babies, she really would have rescued those little feet from those plump little hands.

Luckily Ling Lan did not know what Lan Luofeng was thinking about, or else she would have burst out in tears. This position was not as easy as her mum thought it was. Even for a baby's body, getting into this position was not an easy feat. Sadder still, this was just the easiest first stance — the following eight stances were even more difficult, with each consecutive stance being harder than the stance before it. Right now, Ling Lan really had no idea whether she could really complete learning the nine stances within a year.

She recalled Instructor Number Nine's warning. If she could not master the nine stances in a year, there would be punishment. Of course, to balance it out, if she finished learning the stances within the time limit, there would be a reward — the earlier she finished before the deadline, the better the reward.

In the mind-space, Ling Lan had felt that doing the nine stances was pretty easy, and so had been surprised when Instructor Number Nine had given her a one year deadline. She had arrogantly believed then that she would be able to accomplish the task within a month. Now, she finally realised that she had underestimated the courses of the learning space... they were truly insane.

Actually, the difficulty was not in getting into the position itself, but rather in achieving perfect accuracy. Each and every muscular curvature and angle must be pin-point precise. These few days, Ling Lan had been practising the first stance over and over again, but she still hadn't been able to achieve the most accurate position in one move. Rather, she had to slowly tweak her position to get it right. This did not fulfil her instructor's expectations, which was to get into the most accurate position within one second.

However, Ling Lan was not anxious. She continued her routine of practising the curled position with her physical body when awake, and practising with her spiritual self in the mind-space when asleep. Although practising in the mind-space had no direct impact on her body, it allowed her to hone her intuition — in other words, it gave her the ability to assess whether she had achieved the ideal position within a split second.

Where there's a will, there's a way. After over two months, just as she was about to turn nine-months old, she managed to achieve the state where her body would react the second her will moved. Within the blink of an eye, she could get into the ideal position. This officially marked Ling Lan's mastery of the first stance.

Just as Ling Lan was about to happily begin practising the second stance, some wonderful news brought a halt to Ling Lan's practice. Her mother had finally decided to be charitable and take her out for a day of shopping...

In reality, rich and noble families with deep foundations like the Ling family would usually have a chamberlain to handle everything within the household. As the mistress, Lan Luofeng had no need whatsoever to go out to purchase anything personally. However, Lan Luofeng felt that since Ling Lan had already started to recognise people and notice objects, it was necessary for her to go out so she could explore more of her surroundings.

Although Chamberlain Ling Qin felt that the outing was still a little too premature, he would never go against Lan Luofeng's decisions, and so had quickly made the appropriate arrangements.

As a result, Ling Lan stepped out of the house for the first time to see what the world 10000 years later was like.

Over the grand hall and out the door, Ling Lan was immediately greeted by a refreshing scent. A large expanse of grass appeared before her eyes...

That's right, outside the front door wasn't a marble staircase as Ling Lan half-expected, or even a wide and solid cement road — instead, there was a whole field of verdant grass stretching out into the distance. Ling Lan actually couldn't see the end of it, which just went to show how large the field really was. How large really was her family home?

Ling Lan didn't even have time to get over her awe before a car flew in from a distance. That's right, flew. This thing was like a car yet unlike a car. Its design was very much like the roadsters of Ling Lan's time. There was no one inside the vehicle, and the two seats were such that one was in front of the other. There was no steering wheel, and there were no such things as wheels below it, just a flat surface.

Could this be an unmanned car or plane? Please forgive Ling Lan for her uncertain phrasing — she was unsure what to call the vehicle although she was instinctively leaning towards it being a car.

That thing was hovering in the air, about 3 metres off the ground, but as it got closer to Ling Lan's group, the vehicle descended lower and lower. By the time it stopped in front of Ling Lan, its height had dropped to just 50 centimetres above the ground, a convenient height for embarking and disembarking.

The car doors opened automatically, greatly surprising an unprepared Ling Lan. Lan Luofeng and Ling Qin's attention was currently not on Ling Lan however, so they did not notice Ling Lan's strange change of expression.

"Mistress, please get into the car!" said Ling Qin respectfully.

Into the car? Bingo! 10000 years later, the common transportation vehicle was still the car, so Ling Lan did not have to worry that she would say something wrong by accident in the future.

Holding Ling Lan in her arms, Lan Luofeng moved directly to the back seat, while Ling Qin sat in the front seat.

Ling Qin ordered, "Ling-Zero-Seven ¹, enter fully-sealed mode."

A synthesised voice rang out immediately in response, "Order acknowledged by Ling-Zero-Seven." Following this, the four doors swung shut and a transparent cover appeared to close over the previously open top section, turning the vehicle into a fully-sealed car. (At this very moment, within the mind-space, a napping Little Four was

jolted awake. It felt like a brother was close by...)

The synthesised voice soon rang out again, "Please select your destination."

This time Ling Qin did not answer, but turned back to look inquiringly at Lan Luofeng. After some thought, for safety reasons, Lan Luofeng decided to go to a classic commercial building which only catered to qualified members.

After receiving the destination, the transport vehicle Ling-Zero-Seven was soon off. Perhaps it was due to the fact that the car was hovering, but there was almost no sense of movement. If it weren't for the fact that the scenery outside was speeding by, Ling Lan would have thought that she was only enclosed in a small room.

The car gradually arrived at the busy city centre, giving Ling Lan the first glimpse of traffic. Ling Lan saw many other similar cars driving around theirs. At first, she had thought that all the cars drove at the same height, but in reality, this was not the case. On the same vertical axis, Ling Lan saw four different cars flying in the same direction at different heights, moving together at the same pace.

Ling Lan was awed yet puzzled by this. She wondered how these cars calibrated their heights — were they not afraid of accidents happening?

Her doubt was quickly cleared up, however, when Ling-Zero-Seven said, "Hover car on a collision course detected. Current distance 3 kilometres. Adjustment signal sent..."

It looked like the hover cars operated under a central program and also had to possess a certain level of intelligence — enough for them to discover problems pre-emptively, and to take preventive action to avoid collisions.

As expected, Ling-Zero-Seven's next words showed that the two cars had arrived at an agreement. "Descending one metre! Time for descent will be in three seconds, please watch out."

In three seconds, their hover car really descended one metre, while the approaching hover car ascended by over a metre. Just like that, the two cars brushed by each other, and the distance between the two cars when they had shifted tracks...

Well. Ling Lan's little heart had skipped a beat — that was too goddamn close! Had there even been 10 centimetres between the two cars?!

However, looking at the calm and unconcerned faces of her mother and Chamberlain Ling Qin, Ling Lan knew that this distance must be pretty normal here. It looked like she still had some adapting to do.

Chapter 14

Fear of Heights is a Big Problem

When the hover car entered a sprawling city, Ling Lan could see towering skyscrapers and other tall buildings all around her, making her feel like she was truly in a future world. Almost every level of every building had parking spaces, and Ling Lan saw numerous hover cars hanging by the various levels of the tall buildings as they travelled. The sight made her think of Christmas trees, decorated with baubles, uniquely interesting. It couldn't be helped since those hover cars came in all colours of the rainbow, vibrant and eye-catching.

Very quickly, Ling Lan had arrived at her destination. Ling-Zero-Seven paused for a moment in mid-air as it requested landing approval from their target building. The response came quickly, telling them to park at Area B Number 77-9.

The hover car started circling the building until it arrived at a particular section. Then, it started rising, up and up for an unknown number of levels, before finally touching down on an empty landing spot.

After Ling-Zero-Seven had finished parking properly, the car doors once again swung open on their own. As Lan Luofeng stepped out of the car, bending over slightly in the process, Ling Lan got a glimpse of the floor beneath her mother's feet... and then, tragedy!

The floor was entirely transparent — one could see everything below it. And just like that, Ling Lan grew dizzy and light-headed.

Dammit, so she was afraid of heights! Since she had been bedridden from a young age, for most of her life, she had never known she had this fatal weakness.

Ling Lan could almost cry — she was starting to think that coming to the future was a terrible thing. On the way here from home, she had noticed that almost all the buildings in this world basically consisted of 100 levels or more... Furthermore, the main mode of transportation here seemed to be the hover car, which could freely travel up to several hundred metres into the air. All this just proved that she would never be able to escape from heights in this life.

Ling Lan was tormented... how was she supposed to live? Ignorant of Ling Lan's plight, Lan Luofeng brought her into the building and walked into a transparent viewing elevator.

As for what happened next, not surprisingly, Ling Lan fainted dramatically. Er... I mean, fell asleep. Well, at least that's what her mum Lan Luofeng believed, totally missing the tears clinging to Ling Lan's eyelashes.

Now, even if she did notice them, she would have just thought that those tears were the result of her baby's sleepiness. Look, don't they just make her eyes sparkle in such an adorable way?

Ling Lan did not know how long she had fainted... eh-hm, slept, before she was woken up by a screeching sound. Opening her still somewhat blurry eyes, she saw a rampaging female dragon spitting out indiscriminate fire.

"Lan Luofeng, you think you still have the right to show up here?" The yelling woman was still quite pretty, but that affected peacock-like attitude was rather unbecoming, making her lose all sense of class.

Ling Lan categorised her as an unsavoury character with one glance. She had no tolerance for anyone who scorned her mother.

Still, Ling Lan was a little curious. Till now, she had not seen a single ugly person — everyone had at least looked decent. Ling Lan guessed that this future world was probably technologically advanced enough... enough that a person's features could be calibrated while within the womb?

Uh, Ling Lan, what do you think fetuses are? Programs or machines? Calibrated indeed...

Ling Lan only found out later that, quite simply, although it did have something to do with technology as Ling Lan had guessed, the changes weren't made before birth, but after. Anyone whose appearance did not fit within certain beauty parameters could choose to use beauty correction agents to fix their appearance. Although that sounded impressive, it was basically the same principle as cosmetic surgery, just more technologically advanced so everything could be handled via injections without the need to go under a knife.

Of course, this did not preclude the existence of extremists, who for the sake of greater

beauty beyond regular parameters, would push aside the agents and opt directly for the knife.

Lan Luofeng said nothing in reply to the seething woman, but merely cast a cold glance at her, before ignoring her completely to head towards an empty VIP room with her daughter in her arms.

Lan Luofeng's clear dismissal made the woman even angrier. She grabbed hold of Lan Luofeng by the shoulder, and was just about to speak when Lan Luofeng hissed at her, "Let go!"

Before the woman could do so, Chamberlain Ling Qin had rushed over from a few steps away to administer a light flick of his finger.

With a shout of pain, the woman was pushed back a step and naturally lost her grip. Interest flashed in Ling Lan's eyes — she hadn't expected that the outwardly gentle and understated Chamberlain Ling Qin was such a skilled fighter. That almost imperceptible small movement had been caught by Ling Lan's bright eyes.

"Mistress, please go ahead into the VIP room with the young master. There are too many riff-raff here, they shouldn't disturb you." Without any expression on his face, Ling Qin stepped in between that woman and Lan Luofeng. If he hadn't been a bit too far away from Lan Luofeng back then, this woman wouldn't have had a chance to lay a hand on his mistress.

Ling Qin was annoyed at himself — it was all because of his negligence that the woman had managed to get close to the mistress and the young master. If she had had any evil intentions... at the thought, Ling Qin felt a cold sweat break out along his back in belated fear.

In truth, Ling Qin was being too hard on himself. If someone had truly had intentions to harm Lan Luofeng and Ling Lan, an expert of his calibre would definitely have sensed it and taken the appropriate defensive measures. He had only been taken by surprise because he hadn't sensed any killing intent from the surrounding people. Furthermore, this VIP section was specially set aside for women, so the surrounding people were all either noblewomen or women from rich and powerful families, leading Ling Qin to subconsciously slow his steps.

"Alright, Uncle Qin!" Lan Luofeng had no interest in arguing with the woman and

making a public spectacle.

Ever since Ling Xiao had died and she had broken ties with the Ling family, Lan Luofeng had known that she would be ostracised by some of the noblewomen circles. Over the years, though the Ling family hadn't conducted much proper business, they had been rather proactive in arranging marriage alliances with the various elite and noble families. While they did not manage to connect with the main descendants of those families, they still managed to build some significant contacts among the lesser branches of those families.

That woman who had grabbed Lan Luofeng was one of those Ling family marriage prospects. Her family had agreed to the marriage alliance because they had been interested in the power accumulated by Ling Suzheng and Ling Xiao in the army, and were hoping that the Ling family would be able to help them with that power. However, following Major General Ling Xiao's sudden death, the Ling family had failed in their power struggle with Lan Luofeng and had been forced to leave Doha, leaving her plans in ruins. The main cause of all this was Lan Luofeng's clever trap, which is why her resentment had flared at the sight of Lan Luofeng, causing her to rush up like a mad dog to vent her frustrations. Lan Luofeng was not at all surprised by this turn of events.

However, Lan Luofeng didn't care. She had never had any aspirations for power to begin with. If it weren't for the fact that she had wanted to show her baby the world outdoors, she would have just happily stayed home without a thought for the outside world. As such, why would she care if others ostracised her or scorned her?

It cannot be denied that Lan Luofeng was a proud woman. While Ling Xiao had been around, she had still been willing to make an effort to mingle with these noblewomen. But now, she had no mood for it. Ling Xiao's death had robbed her of half her soul, while the remaining half had become dedicated to the raising of Ling Lan and the defence of Ling Xiao's hard-earned premium military benefits.

Lan Luofeng ignored the whispers that broke out after that scene and walked into one of the unoccupied VIP rooms. At the same time, a waiting VIP service staff entered after her to provide her services.

Ling Lan sighed. The damnable class system still existed 10000 years later despite efforts to remove it — looked like equality among all human beings really only worked in theory.

Chapter 15

Sorry, I Lost Control!

In the VIP room, Ling Lan was having her horizons expanded. She would never have imagined that in this world 10000 years later, one would no longer have to look for items in a store personally, but could just sit comfortably in a VIP room and select categories of items to look at from an ultra-wide screen in the room. These items would be presented to you in 3D imaging, along with a detailed introduction. If a customer was particularly interested in an item, they could click on it to get even more information.

Lan Luofeng perused the items with her full attention. She was basically only looking at items for Ling Lan, and very quickly, item after item had been delivered to the VIP room to await Lan Luofeng's final decision.

"Infant Musical Bed: This item is elliptical in shape. There are two freely-interchangeable modes — half-sealed transparency mode and fully-sealed transparency mode. While the infant is sleeping on the bed, it can automatically select the appropriate music based on the infant's brain waves to encourage sleep. Besides that, this bed comes equipped with its own internet network and can download the latest music in the Federation on its own, saving parents the trouble."

Its own internet network? Automatic downloading and updating? The idle Ling Lan had just been about to fall asleep when these words poured into her ears, waking her up immediately. It should be known that she had been pestered half to death by Little Four recently. Every day he would whine and plead with her to find a chance for him to go online. In his words, "The one who has control over information shall triumph..."

Of course, Little Four was just saying it for the sake of saying it — Ling Lan and Little Four had no real enemies on the surface after all. The reason for Little Four's urgency was that he needed to understand more about this world so he could better serve his host, lest he make any serious mistakes out of ignorance.

Take the incident of the gene stimulating agent for example. It was precisely because Little Four had no clue about the absorption rate of infants in this world that the results had been so shocking, almost causing immense trouble for Ling Lan. If a

mysterious benefactor hadn't stepped in to seal the information, Ling Lan might have already been snatched away by the military to become a war machine.

Of course, the mentally adult Ling Lan would not have been so easily brainwashed and could have chosen to run away and hide. However, that would spell the end of her freedom, unless there came a day when she was strong enough to break free from the shackles of the country.

Whenever Little Four and Ling Lan thought back on the incident, they would break out in a cold sweat. Even now they dared not drop their guard. A large part of the reason why Ling Lan took over two months to master the first stance was that she hadn't dared to put full effort into her training. She was constantly worried there were spies around, so she didn't want to do anything else out of the ordinary to arouse their suspicion.

Today, such great news just happened to fall into her lap. A way for her to access the internet, and in such a subtle manner too. It was an infant bed after all — who would suspect an infant sleeping on the bed to be secretly accessing the internet?

Hehe, brother, you must be crazy, please seek treatment immediately.

Everyone would look at you as if you were an idiot, a fool, a madman... and then throw down that line and walk away.

Ling Lan was overjoyed — this bed was just made for her. Only she could use this infant bed to its full capacity, and not let its functions collect dust.

Ling Lan clambered up decisively and started babbling excitedly while pointing at the infant bed. She was telling her mother that this bed was hers.

Lan Luofeng was on the same wavelength as Ling Lan this time. With some surprise, she said, "Does Ling Lan want this bed? Could it be that Ling Lan likes music? Alright, since Ling Lan likes it, mummy will buy it."

Okay, Lan Luofeng was obviously a doting mother — anything her child wanted, she would get. Fortunately, Ling Lan was a mentally mature person on the inside, or else she would certainly be spoiled rotten under Lan Luofeng's unreserved affection.

Ling Lan got what she wanted, so her mood was great. She went to look for Little Four to gloat.

"Little Four, Little Four..." Little Four seemed to be in a strange mood, for he didn't respond at all to Ling Lan's calls, but was drawing circles on the ground with a sad look on his face.

Ling Lan was exasperated and immediately greeted his head with a fist. "You rascal, what are you doing?"

Unexpectedly, Little Four remained sullenly silent. Under normal circumstances, Little Four would have jumped up by now and would be loudly complaining about Ling Lan's domestic abuse.

Ling Lan was miffed and at a bit of a loss. She proceeded to pinch and pull at Little Four's face with all her might, hoping that Little Four would return to his senses.

This time, there was finally some effect. Listlessly, Little Four smacked her hand away, and asked with a long face, "What's up?"

Ling Lan asked concernedly, "Did something happen?"

Little Four expelled a heavy breath and said, "I have been played by this world."

The words had barely left Little Four's mouth when the furious Ling Lan gave him a solid kick in the ass, sending him flying. "Dammit, are you kidding me?!"

This kick chased away Little Four's strange mood and replaced it with anger. He threw himself at Ling Lan, grabbing hold of her thigh and yelling, "You promised you wouldn't use violence! You're still hitting me, I want to complain! Complain!"

"Complain my foot! I still need to ask you why you tricked me! Looking like you were gonna die, letting me worry?!" For some reason, Ling Lan just couldn't control the anger burning within her. She knew very well that Little Four might have just been playing a prank — this was something she would have easily brushed off with a laugh in the past, why couldn't she do that now?

Ling Lan didn't know that this was an explosion caused by the build-up of negative emotions in her heart. Although Ling Lan had consoled herself all this time after the gene stimulating agent incident that everything was fine, Ling Lan had actually been unable to truly be at ease. She had been frightened that her secret would be exposed to the military, that she would become an experiment and end up torn between life and death. These sorts of negative emotions had been hiding deep in Ling Lan's heart

all this time — if she didn't have a chance to release them, they would have had a negative impact on Ling Lan someday in the future.

It should be said that Ling Lan was very lucky. Ling Lan's mood had brightened considerably due to this outing, a vast difference from her usual calm and forced tolerance. The torments of her previous illness may have given Ling Lan unbelievably strong tolerance and resilience, but that was also where the problem arose. Tolerance was a double-edged sword — being overly tolerant was harmful to both body and mind.

Of course, just this sudden upswing to happiness would not have been enough to set off Ling Lan. However, Ling Lan had become extremely excited by the internet-equipped infant bed, and when she had sought Little Four out to share this news with him, his hopeless demeanour had pushed Ling Lan from the heights of happiness to the lows of anxiety. This sudden and dramatic shift in strongly opposing emotions caused Ling Lan's perfect tolerance to crack.

As a result, the deeply hidden negative emotions exploded... leading to Ling Lan's uncharacteristic kick and subsequent rampage.

The two of them wrestled in the mind-space until they both ran out of energy and flopped to the ground.

Ling Lan lay there, panting heavily. She hadn't expected to fight with a little kid, but her heart now felt amazingly light, as if her soul had been cleansed.

Ling Lan chuckled, saying, "Little Four, I'm sorry. I lost control."

Chapter 16

Little Four Wants to Earn Money

Little Four rolled around the floor once sheepishly, before rolling over to Ling Lan's side. "It's okay. After fighting with you, I feel much better. I was really very unhappy before..."

"How so?"

"When we were in the hover car earlier and Ling-Zero-Seven spoke, I had thought that this world had someone like me. I was so happy... since leaving Mandora, I have never met another of my kind, I was so lonely... but, after secretly talking to Ling-Zero-Seven, I found that Ling-Zero-Seven is not the kin I'm looking for. Although he is very similar, but it's just... different... not the same... do you understand what I'm saying?" Little Four asked, somewhat incoherently, his face full of hope. He couldn't be blamed for his confusion; his mental intelligence was at the level of a five to six year old child at the moment.

Ling Lan replied jokingly, "Just like a human and a monkey?"

Little Four's eyes brightened and he nodded vigorously, saying, "Yeah, just like that."

Ling Lan patted Little Four's head affectionately. "Little Four, you forget, I am also a solitary existence in this world. Since you are also alone, and I am also alone, let us continue walking forward as companions."

Little Four was puzzled. "You are my host, of course I will continue to be bound to you in contract and never leave."

Ling Lan pulled Little Four into an embrace, saying softly, "That's not what I'm saying. I mean like family, like siblings, like the best of friends. Let's entrust our backs to each other, and become each other's most trusted person." Ling Lan was willing to put her faith in Little Four, for Little Four was the one who had accompanied her through the end of her last life, and he was also the one who had given her this new life. All these experiences had made Ling Lan accept Little Four, viewing him as a younger brother.

Ling Lan was determined to compensate for the regrets of the past life with her new life, and so she wanted a healthy body, freedom and space, and also a friend she could talk to about anything. A younger brother who trusted her, who she could also trust in return...

Laying in Ling Lan's arms, Little Four was a little lost. He could not understand — his core dictated that he must be loyal to his host, so why did Ling Lan say they should become each other's most trustworthy person? Did they not already have that sort of relationship?

This was the first time Little Four was thinking with his full processing power — even if his core chip became overheated, even if his processes started to slow, he still wanted the answer to this question. Because of this, he knew what it was to want for the first time. He did not want to see Ling Lan disappointed. Even though he knew this was against regulations, he wanted to be selfish just this once.

It was now two months after the fight, and during this time, Little Four had managed to infiltrate this world's internet through the bed's equipped network. Under Little Four's clarifications, Ling Lan had learned that the virtual net here was already very developed, fully able to stand as a secondary world on its own.

Ling Lan highly suspected that her mum was able to confine herself at home most likely because of the existence of this virtual network, allowing her to do whatever she wanted to without needing to step foot out of her home. Moreover, she wouldn't have to worry about her identity, and could choose to live freely.

From the information he gleaned on the internet, Little Four had discovered the true value of the gene stimulating agents, and had also found out the typical absorption rate of the infants here. After Ling Lan was informed, she thought back to her first session with fear — they had overdid it with the absorption of the agent that time after all. Fortunately, throughout history, there were still a few babies who had absorbed even more agent than her, so at least she wasn't breaking any records.

The two of them conferred, coming to a decision that no matter how many tubes of agent the military brought next month, they would only absorb ten.

Actually, Ling Lan didn't even want to absorb ten tubes. She only wanted to absorb

about six or seven tubes, an amount which would match up with her original assessment results. However, Little Four was firmly against it. Because from the information he had gathered, as they grew, the number of tubes an average baby absorbed would only increase rather than decrease after their first time. Only after they had matured would the number gradually fall and taper off, ending when they could finally no longer absorb any.

Since Ling Lan had already absorbed ten tubes her first time, it would make no sense for the number to decrease the second time. Rather than risk looking even more abnormal, she might as well continue absorbing ten tubes. After all, that number had already been established the first time, so it wouldn't be any more surprising to the military. Furthermore, Ling Lan's body really needed that agent — Little Four had found that ever since Ling Lan started training in physical skills, her spiritual power had started growing at an even more rapid pace. Little Four was worried that Ling Lan's body growth would not be able to keep up with the growth of her spiritual power.

After some internal debate, Ling Lan decided to accept Little Four's suggestion. Meanwhile, to better support Ling Lan, Little Four was struggling over how to earn money on the internet. This was because he had discovered suppliers for the agent on the net, and although the impurities in those agents were much higher than the ones provided by the military, that was not a problem for Little Four who could clear away those impurities as easily as he could eat a carrot.

Erm, well, he couldn't really eat human food, so... alright, let's just assume it's a virtual carrot. The point is, it was very easy for him.

For this grand ambition, Little Four had even secretly created a bank account by hacking into the system of the Centre of the Federation Banking Alliance. Naturally, bypassing the defences of the system was like child's play to him, as easy as eating a virtual carrot. To ensure the security of the account, without any approval, he had set the account's level to triple-S. It wasn't that he didn't want to set it higher, but only one five-S account existed at the moment, which was the account of the Prime Minister of the Federation, so Little Four knew he couldn't go that far.

Ling Lan observed as Little Four did all this and finally understood how amazing Little Four actually was — in the virtual world, Little Four was a god.

However, no matter how amazing Little Four was, he still had no clue how to go about

earning money, and so could only turn to Ling Lan for advice. Unfortunately, Ling Lan was also clueless about this. Think about it, her previous life was pretty much spent on a sickbed — other than learning about the world and getting information from the internet, she had basically spent the rest of her time reading novels and comics... If she had known this day would come, she would have spent that time learning how to do business and looking up financial information instead...

Thump thump thump! Ling Lan was startled by the sudden sounds beside her. Lifting her head, she was stunned by the pile of books that had appeared in the great hall of the mind-space... Ling Lan picked up a random book from the pile. The cover read <Philosophy of Finance>. Looking at the titles of the other books in the pile, Ling Lan's face turned black.

Little Four looked at her with a face begging for praise, so proud of himself as if he had done a great thing.

Ling Lan said through gritted teeth, "Why did you bring out so many financial books? And where did you get these?"

Little Four said smugly, "Weren't you thinking about how you wanted to read more about these things? Luckily while you were in your previous body, I had downloaded and stored all the books I could get from the internet there. No matter what you want, I have it..."

Ling Lan blew up. "You think if I finish reading these I can become a business expert overnight? I think you're dreaming! What good can books do?!"

Little Four drooped. "Are they useless?"

"Of course they are! It's all theory. It's not that easy in the real world — the most these books can do is just provide some entertainment," said Ling Lan, resigned. She knew very well that she had no talent in this area.

Little Four was very disappointed. With low spirits, he said, "So they are only for human entertainment. Looks like I've wasted my time. To get all these books, I have spent so much time..."

Seeing this, Ling Lan felt sorry for Little Four, and quickly reassured him, "No no, there could still be some precious books in your collection. And some people who want these books may never be able to get them anymore..."

A flash of inspiration rushed through Ling Lan's mind, but remained just out of her grasp.

Little Four sighed, "In your previous world, all these books were freely available on the internet, who wouldn't be able to get them? Stop trying to make me feel better..."

"My previous world? 10000 years ago..." Ling Lan finally caught hold of that spark. Excitedly, she said, "Little Four, I have figured out how we can earn money!"

Chapter 17

Redemption of Honour Points?

Little Four asked excitedly, "What is it?"

Ling Lan laughed and said, "After these ten thousand years, even if there are cloud drives and other sorts of storage methods, I don't think all books would have been preserved till now... why don't you go look and see if there are any requests for old books on the internet?"

Little Four was a little hesitant — even if there were such requests, there wouldn't be many, which would only result in chump change. For his purpose of buying Ling Lan more gene stimulating agent, he would need a lot more money, the more the better, so this little amount would not even be a drop in the ocean.

Exasperated, Ling Lan flicked Little Four's forehead, saying, "Don't look down on this little bit of money. We just need to get started and collect some seed money first before looking for other ways to earn money. Otherwise, even if an opportunity appears, we won't be able to do anything."

With this, Little Four understood, and abruptly felt the weight on his shoulders grow exponentially. He stood up tall and thumped his chest, saying, "You can count on me." Looking at his seriously adorable 'believe-in-me-you-will-not-regret-it' face, Ling Lan couldn't help but snicker in her heart. She found herself thankful once again that she had Little Four at her side, who was willing to work hard for her benefit.

After some discussion, the two of them decided that Little Four would be fully responsible for all matters on the virtual network. That said, safety was the top priority — they'd rather take things slow and gradually accumulate their seed money, as long as they could keep things as covert as possible. Honestly, they really didn't need to rush. Even if they could buy the gene stimulating agents right now, who would be able to use them? Little Four was a virtual being, while Ling Lan was still a baby who could not even crawl properly yet.

After passing on the follow-up tasks to Little Four, Ling Lan happily went to bed without giving any further thought to the matter. Left alone, a fired-up Little Four

rushed into the virtual world and started doing as Ling Lan said, slowly accumulating cash.

Ling Lan was someone capable of putting her full trust in others, so she did not pay any further attention to the matter after entrusting Little Four with it, not even asking for a progress report. Little Four was touched by this show of trust — oh how much faith did his lord have in him — so he decided he must do his best to serve her until his death.

A while back, Little Four had consumed several hundred thousand words of the entire *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* when fulfilling the request of a client. After that, he had become obsessed, and this was reflected in his method of addressing Ling Lan — instead of the original 'host', he now called her 'lord'. Every time Ling Lan heard that form of address, her head would throb — why did this silly child love cosplay so much?

It had to be said that Little Four was really very innocent. He had no idea that Ling Lan's 'show of trust' was actually just blithe unconcern. In Ling Lan's opinion, while it would be great if they could earn money, it was also fine even if they didn't manage to earn any. After all, Little Four was the one who was gung-ho about it, and it was a zero-cost business, so it really didn't matter whether the results were good or bad. She was just glad to see Little Four in high spirits, no longer looking as lonely as he was before.

Alright, to be honest, Ling Lan had assigned this task to Little Four as a way to distract him and cheer him up — and poor Little Four had fallen for it hook, line, and sinker.

Time passed by quickly, and Ling Lan finally became a toddler capable of moving about on two feet. During this time, she had received one more round of agent injections, and as discussed, they stopped absorbing at the tenth tube like before. As for the military people, it was the same group as before, and they seemed to have come mentally prepared this time, remaining calm throughout the whole procedure. In fact, they were even gaining the mistaken impression that absorbing ten tubes was a completely natural phenomenon, not deserving of any surprise whatsoever. It had to be said that the military was certainly made up of extraordinarily mentally resilient and adaptable people.

One day, during Ling Lan's sixteenth month of life, she was practising her bendy poses as usual, diligently going through all nine stances one at a time. She had actually

managed to learn all nine stances by the time she was just a little over fifteen months old, and since then, she had made sure to practise all nine stances in order every day. Of course, there were still inconsistencies and mistakes, but Ling Lan would correct them as she progressed, gradually converting the nine stances into basic instinct.

This time, when Ling Lan completed the ninth stance, she suddenly felt a surge of heat run through her body. It was so comfortable that she couldn't help but moan in pleasure. This was something that had never happened before — although she would also feel slightly warm and her body would be loose and comfortable after finishing the nine stances, she had never felt this sort of euphoric floaty feeling before.

Ling Lan laid comfortably on her bed, still basking in the echoes of contentment, when she abruptly found that her consciousness had been drawn into the learning mind-space.

Before this, she had always chosen to enter actively — this passive access was new.

Before Ling Lan could protest the learning space's high-handedness, an aloof man had appeared out of thin air right in front of her.

Ling Lan jerked in surprise, but immediately straightened up to say, "Hello, Instructor Number One!" She definitely must not let this formidable man notice her annoyance. Ling Lan intuitively knew that if she angered him, she would lose a layer of skin even if she didn't die.

"Firstly, congratulations on your perfect completion of the foundation chapter of the advanced physical skills course," said Number One, his face as emotionless and tone as cold as ever.

Despite that, for some reason, Ling Lan just felt that Instructor Number One was actually in a very good mood.

"Now you shall receive your reward," continued Number One.

Ling Lan felt excitement stir within her — what kind of reward would Instructor Number One give?

At this moment, an extremely mechanical voice piped up beside Ling Lan's ear, "Reward: first item, time remaining from deadline: 49 days, awards 49 honour points; second item, assessment results: perfect, awards 100 honour points. Total of all items:

149 honour points. Please confirm receipt."

Facing Number One this time, Ling Lan finally realised that the mechanical voice she had heard before had not come from Number One, but seemed to be the voice of the learning space's system.

Ling Lan chuckled dryly. Hindsight is truly 20/20 — she only noticed now that although Number One's voice was very cold, it was also crisp and clear, with none of the mechanical inflections of the system's voice. It was a shame that Instructor Number One had appeared behind her that first time, causing her to mistakenly attribute the mechanical voice to him.

Instructor Number One's voice rang out once more, "Now I shall explain the usage of honour points. Other than the core compulsory courses, the learning space also provides many additional supplementary courses which require honour points to unlock, and of course there are also games and other types of entertainment available. You may freely choose how you would like to use these honour points."

"Use? Does this mean that honour points are not that easy to get?" asked Ling Lan calmly. She knew very well that Number One's words may have some hidden meaning – it could even be another test – so she couldn't just take things at face value.

Unfortunately, her questioning was not fruitful this time round. Number One did not answer, merely keeping his silence, though Ling Lan could sense a very light trace of humour in his eyes. Perhaps she had guessed correctly that honour points were indeed very precious. Or perhaps this first seemingly generous award of honour points was another trap, trying to fool people into thinking honour points were easy to get so they would spend them thoughtlessly.

A large screen suddenly appeared in front of Ling Lan. On the screen, there were many general category selections. It looked like these were the things that she could redeem with her honour points.

"Do I really have to choose right now?" Ling Lan asked doggedly. Since she already knew that honour points were important, she didn't want to use them recklessly.

Number One said, "You must. This is also one of your lessons." Number One smashed her hopeful plans, and continued, "You must choose within ten minutes, or else the system will enforce a random draw."

At these words, Ling Lan's heart thumped. Something niggled at her mind, so without wasting anymore time, she opened the redemption window.

Chapter 18

Between a Rock and a Hard Place

Ling Lan flicked through the options on the screen. There really were all sorts of courses, from harp-playing to chess and various art and literature courses, even embroidery was included. Of course, there were also all sorts of martial combat skills, and even some really strange and bizarre courses she had never heard of before. The points to redeem these courses ranged from one point to several hundreds of points, while some even required up to one or two thousand points and perhaps even more.

The gaming and leisure options were noticeably more expensive, starting from a base redemption amount of 50 points, with the more expensive options reaching up to 5000 points to 10000 points. Of course, this section also had a smorgasbord of options. Take games for example — there were traditional games with retro designs, magic and sorcery games, futuristic apocalyptic games, galactic mecha games, martial combat games, and they actually even had dating simulation games...

As for the other leisure options, anything you could think of as recreation could be found there. When she had tapped into that category, Ling Lan hadn't even known where to look. There were just too many options.

Hell, was this still a learning space meant for the cultivation of young talent? Why did she feel a corrupting influence emanating from these options?

Ling Lan decisively exited from the recreational categories, and opened up the learning courses. Time was counting down, so she did not have a moment to lose. Since she had to redeem something, she might as well use the honour points she had now to redeem something she needed most at present.

With a rough idea of what she wanted, Ling Lan clicked open the combat category, and then chose the subcategory of defence.

Countless defensive combat techniques and skills immediately popped up on the screen. Ling Lan selected the option to list the skills and techniques according to honour point requirement in ascending order, from the lowest to the highest.

The first skill she saw cost only 1 honour point — Iron Skin. The description below it explained that the skill could turn the skin of a person's entire body into iron, capable of withstanding heavy blows. With mastery, the practitioner's skin would become a metallic colour. Without any hesitation, Ling Lan immediately sent the option flying — how could a soft and delicate girl like her allow her skin to become metallic in colour? It's not like she wanted to become Iron Woman.

Next were the skills that required 10 honour points to redeem. There were a few more than those requiring 1 point, but when she counted them, there were only about 10 options. Ling Lan found that interesting — there was one skill which cost 1 honour point, and ten skills which cost 10 honour points... did that mean that there would be fifty skills which cost 50 honour points?

Of course Ling Lan was just thinking about this idly; her full attention was actually upon these ten options before her. She only had ten minutes after all, there was no time to waste.

Eagle Claw? What, mastery meant having claw-like hands? No can do.

Iron Head? She needed to bang her head against hard objects every day? That was just asking for pain and suffering. Dismissed.

Golden finger? Practise by jabbing her fingers at trees every day? Ridiculous. Ignored.

Crippling Legs? Mastery meant legs with exposed veins? Dear god that would be terrifying. No way.

Long-ape Arms? What, mastery meant one's arms would become as long as an ape's? Dammit, even though she would have to live this life as a man, she still didn't want to live as an ape-man. That would be too tragic — no way in hell.

...

Why did all these skills either change a person's appearance or require self-mutilation to achieve mastery? Ling Lan complained internally. Just as Ling Lan was about to give up on redeeming any of the 10-point skills, she noticed the final skill on the list — Rabbit Sky Leap.

Rabbit Sky Leap: A conditional skill. Requires a high degree of body flexibility. Minimum requirement of B-rank flexibility, but A-rank and above flexibility

recommended.

This skill does not change one's appearance after mastery, but will increase overall strength by three times or more. Precise increments will depend on practitioner's flexibility and intensity of practice. Please observe changes and adjust accordingly.

Practice method:...

This Rabbit Sky Leap skill captured Ling Lan's heart immediately — it seemed like a perfectly normal skill, no torture or mutilation mentioned in its training method. Besides that, the condition seemed tailor-made for her. The basic nine stances she had been practicing had focused specifically on increasing a body's flexibility. Instructor Number Nine had clearly stated that once she mastered the nine stances, her body flexibility would be at A-rank.

In general, babies were born with a flexibility of B-rank, but if they didn't practise any sort of physical skill such as the nine stances, their flexibility would decline as they grew older. A regular adult would have a flexibility between D-rank to F-rank.

If one trained in offensive physical skills, flexibility would drop even more, perhaps not even reaching D-rank. Meanwhile, a practitioner of the Balanced Series of physical skills would at most be able to maintain a flexibility of C-rank, with exceptional cases being able to achieve B-rank.

As for the Defensive Series, there were two branches within the set itself — the Endurance Series and the Flexible Series. The Endurance Series focused on increasing a body's toughness, hardening it to increase defensive ability, thus reducing flexibility, which would result in a body flexibility similar to those practicing the Balanced Series. Only the Flexible Series, as its name implied, focused on training up a body's flexibility, and would allow practitioners to achieve a flexibility of A-rank and above.

The basic nine stances that Ling Lan learned were from the Flexible Series. The learning space had automatically assigned the Flexible Series to Ling Lan because she was a girl, and because her natural flexibility had already been very high.

It looked like the learning space also had some recognition of gender, and had been unwilling to produce an iron-muscled woman.

At this point, Ling Lan had already made her decision, but she still cautiously browsed through the skills which required 50 honour points. The quality of the skills naturally

increased as the cost of the skills increased, but the associated restrictions and conditions also got increasingly tougher. Many of the skills required a certain level of body strength, resilience, or flexibility, as well as a certain level of physical skill. Ling Lan knew that even if she redeemed these skills now, she still wouldn't be able to practise them for three to five years. After all, her body was just not at that level yet, there was still much more training she had to do first.

Just then, Number One reminded, "There is not much time left, have you chosen?"

Ling Lan smiled and said, "Yes, I choose the Rabbit Sky Leap."

Number One warned her, "The Rabbit Sky Leap only requires 10 honour points. You still have 139 points, what else will you choose? Please choose immediately."

Ling Lan shook her head. "I only want this one. I don't need anything else right now."

Number One sniffed. "You still have so many honour points left. Do you really want to waste them?"

Ling Lan smirked like a little fox. "Will they really be wasted?"

Number One just stared at her placidly. His gaze was steady and indifferent, as if telling her that if she really chose only the Rabbit Sky Leap, all her remaining honour points would be cleared away.

Ling Lan's resolution started to waver under Number One's stare — should she just redeem all her honour points now, and just wait to learn those skills later on when she met their requirements?

But then that was also a problem... Since she had no idea what the learning space would assign her next, if she redeemed her points now and chose something that was unsuitable for her later on, that would also be a waste.

Should she gamble now? Or gamble for the future? Ling Lan struggled over her decision. She lifted her head to look at Number One, hoping to get some sort of hint from him. After all, the reason she wanted to save her honour points to begin with was because of Number One's earlier words. Had she misunderstood what he was saying?

Chapter 19

The Powerful Cheat Code

So that she could hold onto the free treatment provided by the country in her past life, over her 24 years of illness, Ling Lan had learned how to observe body language and react accordingly. She had learned how to appeal to the doctors and nurses around her, acting cute and being well-behaved. The quota for free treatment was limited, and there were always plenty of other patients waiting in line, so she knew she had to get the researchers and caregivers to like her and care for her personally. This way, subconsciously, they would want to keep her around and would put in a good word for her when necessary.

Her skills in this area were no use here against Number One, however. He was a battle-hardened veteran warrior — how could little inexperienced Ling Lan hope to glean anything from his body language? The more Ling Lan stared at Number One, the more helpless she felt, until the point where she felt that it might be better to just redeem all her points now after all. It'd be better than letting them all go to waste.

Just as she was about to ask to continue redeeming, the system announced, "Time's up. Exchange 10 honour points for Rabbit Sky Leap, successful!"

Ling Lan was abruptly jolted into awareness. Unconsciously, it had already been ten minutes. Knowing that there was nothing else she could do, Ling Lan resolutely pushed aside all her anxiety. Since God had already helped her decide, there was no point having regrets even if she was going to lose all those honour points. It had to be said that Ling Lan was a very mature and adaptable girl — perhaps those 24 years of torment due to illness had taught her that there was no point in obsessing over the unobtainable.

The system continued to announce, "One redemption successful. Redemption mission completed, 1 honour point awarded. Remaining honour points: 140 points. Shall be reserved for the next redemption."

Ling Lan was ecstatic. She had guessed correctly! As expected, honour points could be saved up — Number One's words had been a hint after all. The word 'use' had been a subtle hint that honour points were precious, while the following statement that a

random draw would be enforced after ten minutes indirectly implied that only one exchange was required.

This seemingly simple statement was actually rife with meaning. The cost of the items that could be redeemed ranged from 1 point up to several tens of thousands of points, and though Ling Lan only had 149 points, the things she could redeem were numerous. This presented a problem — if the enforced draw by the system randomly selected an item that only cost 1 point or 10 points, or perhaps even 50 points, what would happen to the rest of the unredeemed honour points?

Number One's explanations had not covered any of that. Based on her previous experience, Ling Lan had quickly sensed something strange about the scenario, fearing that this was yet another trick. Perhaps this forced redemption was actually just a way for the system to teach new users how to redeem their honour points, just like how an instructor makes you practise a skill once in front of them right after they finished teaching you.

Of course Ling Lan knew that every little action of the learning space was not as simple as it seemed, so the forced redemption must have some deeper meaning beyond that. However, Ling Lan didn't think it was necessary to spend much time and effort to figure it out.

So she chose the Rabbit Sky Leap which was most suitable for her. Not only could she practise it immediately, it was also a very subtle skill. Ling Lan was very satisfied with her choice. As for whether it was the best choice, Ling Lan was not overly concerned about that. She didn't expect the best things to just appear in her path randomly, as if she were the 'main character' in a story, but was content to just take things as they came.

Instructor Number One was extremely pleased with Ling Lan's performance this time as well. Without further ado, he switched places with Instructor Number Nine, who proceeded to instruct Ling Lan in the Rabbit Sky Leap as well as the next chapter of her physical skills training — the Body Refining Nine Stances.

Training for the Body Refining Nine Stances was a hundred times more difficult than training for the Basic Nine Stances. For the following month, Ling Lan trained laboriously to master the first stance with little to no effect — she couldn't even get the positioning of a single arm right.

Ling Lan felt that this was a miserable mission. Judging by her current progress, she would never be able to accomplish it within the given deadline of five years. Fortunately, Ling Lan had a positive attitude. Even if it felt like an impossible mission, she wasn't anxious or impatient. Every day, she worked hard to conquer it little by little, in hopes that when the deadline arrived, she wouldn't be too far off the mark. Ling Lan had deduced from the first reward of honour points that the system's punishment would most likely be based on a similar principle — the less she was behind, the lighter the punishment she would receive.

Very soon, it was once again the time for a session of gene agent injections. Ling Lan had assumed that this third session would be very much like the first two sessions, where she would just be laid on the bed to rest right after.

Unexpectedly, when all the military personnel had left, Ling Lan's mother Lan Luofeng had picked her up and had walked through several hidden passages to arrive at a small room. There was almost nothing in the room — only a small single bed by one of the walls and a waist-high wooden tub in the centre of the room. Nothing else.

The moment Lan Luofeng entered the room, she asked, "Is everything ready?"

"Yes, Mistress!" A middle-aged woman stood within the room. Ling Lan recognised her — she was chamberlain Ling Qin's wife, Ling Nanyi.

Lan Luofeng stepped forward to stand before the wooden tub. Ling Lan could now see that a little more than half the tub was full of an inky-green liquid that smelled heavily of medicinal herbs.

Ling Lan was deeply surprised — so far in this time period, all she had seen were medications of Western influence, such as injections or pills, which were bland and tasteless. Now, this familiar smell abruptly brought her back to the memories of her past life. She had had to drink so much of this sort of herbal concoction, but still... Ling Lan's forehead scrunched up in worry — could it be that she was supposed to drink all of this medicinal liquid?

Ling Lan felt shudders of apprehension within her heart. From her mother's and Ling Nanyi's demeanour, that tub of medicinal liquid was most certainly for her. Looking at the wooden tub once again, and then mentally comparing it to her own tiny body...

Hell, were they trying to kill her? If she finished drinking all this medicinal liquid, she would definitely be the first baby in the world to die from a distended belly due to Chinese medicine.

Ling Lan's mum was not as ruthless as Ling Lan had thought. "Is the temperature of the water alright? Ling Lan won't be scalded, will she?"

Thank God, she was supposed to bathe in it and not drink it. Ling Lan cried internal tears of relief as she hugged her mother tightly. Her life was spared.

"Relax, Mistress. I have tested it properly, there won't be any problems," replied Ling Nanyi firmly. Ling Lan was the Ling household's only hope — she would never allow any bit of carelessness when it came to Ling Lan's welfare.

Lan Luofeng did not hesitate any further. In short order, she had stripped Ling Lan naked and placed her into the tub.

Ling Lan felt as if she were soaking in a hot spring, warm and comfortable, when suddenly she felt a surge of heat invade the core of her body from her skin. An indescribable feeling suffused her entire body — like pain yet not pain, like an itch yet not an itch. Ling Lan, who had never before been afraid of pain, actually couldn't help but moan at the strange sensation.

Lan Luofeng was startled by this and looked at Ling Nanyi anxiously, wondering how Ling Lan was doing.

Ling Nanyi reassured her, "Mistress, this is normal, the young master is fine."

As time passed, Ling Lan started getting used to the strange sensation. But then, the feeling escalated into intense pain, almost reminiscent of the body-shredding pain of her previous life...

Oddly enough, this intense pain actually calmed Ling Lan down instead, as she knew she was fully capable of withstanding this sort of pain from 24 years of experience.

"Huh? What is this thing?" Ling Lan heard Little Four exclaim within her mind.

"What?" Although she could manage the pain, it was still nice to have someone to talk to to distract her from it based on her experience. She was very happy to chit chat with Little Four even while wracked with pain.

"It's a very strange energy... it is actually raising the activation of your muscles and their resilience." Little Four was very surprised and curious. How was this tub of medicinal liquid brewed? There was no information on this concoction within his databases.

"This must be a secret formula of the Ling family, specially made for refining the body." In contrast, Ling Lan wasn't as surprised. No matter how weak and insignificant the Ling family was, they were still an old clan that had persevered for over several thousand years, so it was not at all surprising that they had developed this secret formula over the years and had passed it on through the main branch of the family, Ling Xiao's branch.

"Lord, the things in this world of yours are amazing. Heavens, what did I discover? This medicinal liquid is actually 96 percent plant-based..." Little Four marvelled. Who'd have thought such an amazing concoction could be made without having to utilise any sort of advanced technology? This was truly a miraculous world.

Ling Lan sweat-dropped. What else would a Chinese herbal concoction be made of if not medicinal herbs?

"And what's the remaining 4 percent? Why is it so familiar... poison? Yep, should be a type of snake poison... and what's this? Scorpion? Ce-centipede, and... spider venom!" Little Four's tone of voice kept getting higher and higher until he was practically screeching. It couldn't be helped — within this one year, Little Four had learned about the various creatures that could be found in human society, and although he was OK with most of them, he really had no tolerance for creepy crawlies. According to his sense of aesthetics, they were so ugly that they should be wiped from the surface of the Earth.

Ling Lan chose to ignore Little Four's manic flailing in her mind. She was busy marvelling at the fact that she was actually going through a purification ritual like some main character in one of those novels she had read.

Yep, travelling to the future was not too bad after all. The cheat code of the God of Time and Space Travel was pretty powerful.

Chapter 20

Ling Lan is a Glutton

Lan Luofeng and Ling Nanyi stood beside Ling Lan and anxiously observed her expression and body condition. This medicinal liquid needed to be bathed in while conscious for maximum effect — the effects would be greatly weakened if the bather lost consciousness, and the first soak was the one with the greatest impact.

Ling Nanyi saw that although Ling Lan's little forehead was all scrunched up, her facial expression did not show any signs of the savage struggle that other children had during these baths. She nodded approvingly — as expected of their master's child, this tolerance level was extraordinary. If their master was still around, he would probably be greatly heartened that he had such a reliable descendant.

Every time Ling Lan's face twitched, Lan Luofeng subconsciously wanted to pull Ling Lan back into her arms. The pain in her eyes eclipsed the pain that Ling Lan was enduring — she really did not want to see her own child going through this sort of crushing pain. She had never forgotten what Ling Xiao had once said about the medicinal liquid — he had said that it was very effective, but it also inflicted tremendous pain in the process.

Lan Luofeng's gaze shone with boundless sorrow, and tears glimmered in the corners of her eyes.

Ling Nanyi sensed Lan Luofeng's reluctance and tried to comfort her. "Mistress, you need to bear it and let it happen. This will help build up the young master's foundations so he can live a better life in the future. In the end, this world is still a world where the strong triumph... without true strength, we will not be able to protect what the master left behind."

Lan Luofeng nodded. "I know. It's alright, I can bear this. I believe that Ling Lan can continue holding on too." Ling Nanyi was right. A strong foundation was necessary for her child to be able to live freely in the future.

Meanwhile...

"I need to go research this formula. It's too miraculous! If I can understand the medicinal properties and how they work together, perhaps I may be able to develop a new agent! Lord, I'll be going now, take your time soaking..." Without any remorse whatsoever, Little Four abandoned Ling Lan and ran off to his research lab to pursue his next great invention.

Hells, this heartless bastard! Ling Lan, who had been hoping that Little Four would continue talking with her to share her pain, was full of contempt for his selfish actions. Later, she would definitely teach Little Four a lesson and would make sure he understood that nothing was more important than his lord.

The intense pain caused Ling Lan's body to spasm uncontrollably, low moans spilling in an endless stream from her mouth. Suddenly, she recalled that her Qi exercises could somewhat alleviate this sort of pain, and quickly began practising them. It actually worked — the pain was greatly dampened and became bearable again.

The violent spasms of Ling Lan's body just now made Lan Luofeng and Ling Nanyi even more anxious, but while Lan Luofeng was purely heartsick over Ling Lan's suffering, Ling Nanyi was concerned over what would come next. She knew that the next half hour would be the most critical period of the medicinal bath, and it was also the part that was most difficult to bear. Most of the children would faint then — even their master had become comatose, though still aware, for half a day back when he had endured this coming half hour.

Perhaps the Qi exercises Ling Lan practised had been deeply ingrained into her body memory since she had been practising them since she was in the womb, for Ling Lan entered into a deep meditative state very quickly. She could no longer feel the pain wracking her body, but merely felt as if she was submerged in a miasma of heat.

Seeing Ling Lan's slack face, Lan Luofeng relaxed in turn. It looked like Ling Lan had managed to overcome yet another hurdle.

On the other hand, Ling Nanyi was confused since she knew the true properties of the medicinal liquid. Could it be that the herbal contents had been absorbed entirely? She peered at the inky-green water — the saturation of the colour indicated that there was

still plenty of herbal content left.

If so, then the pain should still be present and should have even intensified at this point. It seemed like their Young Master Ling Lan was either a child with abnormally high pain tolerance, or else had deficient pain receptors, being less sensitive than the average child.

Ling Nanyi was leaning more toward the latter possibility, since it was rather inconceivable that a one and a half year old child would have such a high pain tolerance. This misconception of Ling Nanyi would bring even greater suffering to Ling Lan in her future training, as the Ling family tried to compensate for her deficient pain receptors by intensifying their training, so that she could know what true pain was like.

After an indeterminate amount of time, still groggy from her trance, Ling Lan sensed that she had been picked up from the tub and placed on the bed. Someone started massaging her gently, and Ling Lan felt so comfortable that she could stand it no longer, and... fell asleep.

After sending away the military personnel, Ling Qin had been standing guard outside the room all this while. Seeing them come out of the room, he asked intently, "How was the effect?"

Ling Nanyi could not contain her elation. She nodded vigorously as she reported, "The effect was much better than expected, all areas have been improved by 30 to 80 percent."

Ling Qin almost broke down at these words. "Really?!" It should be known that throughout the history of administering these medicinal baths, Master Ling Xiao had recorded the best effects so far. That year, the recorded improvements had only been between 10 to 50 percent.

Seeing Ling Nanyi nod decisively in confirmation, Ling Qin couldn't stop his tears from falling as he muttered fervently, "God bless our Ling family, God bless our Ling family."

Ling Nanyi surreptitiously grabbed hold of her old companion's hand. She knew how much this news meant to her husband. Although Master Ling Xiao had been the master of the Ling family, he had been raised at the knee of her husband. Ling Qin had loved Ling Xiao like a son, and his passing had been as hard on her husband as it had been

on the mistress.

"Looks like the young master has inherited the physical qualities of Master Ling Xiao. Being able to absorb ten tubes of gene stimulating agent, and even being able to get a better effect from the medicinal bath..." Ling Nanyi said, wondering.

Ling Qin was still overwhelmed by his emotions, and could only nod emphatically in agreement with tears in his eyes. The old Ling couple could only interpret it this way — they could not know that effects of the bath were so remarkable because of the Qi exercises. The shifting of the body's energies during the exercise had greatly increased its absorption ability, allowing the medicine to permeate even deeper into the body, hence resulting in improvements like never before.

Just like that, Ling Lan began her life of medicinal baths. That aside, she continued to contort herself into bizarre poses that stretched the limits of the human body every day. Of course, she practised those poses in secret, lest her mum grow frantic with concern.

One year passed after another as Ling Lan slowly grew up. Before she knew it, she had become a bona fide glutton, able to eat her mum's full day of meals in one sitting.

Heavens, she was only four years old! Was she destined to grow sideways?

That won't do! Today, she must diet. After all, she had a dream to be a child with 'four greats' — great ideals, great morals, great discipline, and great goals — she must not lose to her own stomach.

Ling Lan was just cheering herself on when she noticed that the large serving of fried noodles before her had vanished. With a constipated expression, she muttered to herself at the insufficiency of the noodles. They hadn't satisfied her hunger much at all! Rubbing her flat tummy, she mentally cautioned herself not to eat any more...

A sudden shift in facial expressions, and Ling Lan slapped a sure hand onto the table, shouting, "Give this young master an extra-large serving of beef steak!"

Dammit, hunger pangs were the worst. Ling Lan would much rather suffer pain than hunger pangs.

Oh well. She was already planning to live as a man this life after all — if she ended up becoming a cool and stylish, elegant and poised, unparalleled handsome gentleman, and caused the women of the world to fall for her and fight over her, that would be a catastrophe. So... for the sake of those clueless women and to minimize her sin, and also so that other men will be able to wed and graduate from bachelorhood, she should just go ahead and become a little fatter!

Ahem, ahem, she was such a soft-hearted person!

Ling Lan, moved by her own self-sacrificial attitude, resolutely took a large bite of the freshly served steak before her.

It should be noted that Ling Lan was very quick to adjust her world view just so she had an excuse to indulge in her gluttony.

Chapter 21

The Intricacies of the Qi Exercises!

Ling Lan's consistently voracious appetite once again pushed Lan Luofeng into a quandary — it was a blessing that her child could eat, but... was it really alright for Ling Lan to eat so much?

Ling Qin and Ling Nanyi were asking themselves the same question as well. Ling Lan's appetite could certainly be classified as monstrous — even if one tried to explain it away as a sign that her body needed energy, the amount of food she consumed was still rather hard to accept.

Looking at Ling Lan's petite figure, however, they could only shake their heads and sigh. It just didn't make sense. Could it be that their young master's stomach was from an alternate dimension?

With time, Lan Luofeng's worries proved to be unnecessary. Although Ling Lan ate a lot, her body did not change much besides growing a little taller; her waistline remained the same. Furthermore, unlike the other children who received injections of the gene stimulating agent, she did not bulk up, but looked rather weak and skinny instead.

Accordingly, Lan Luofeng banished all thoughts of getting Ling Lan to diet. Her child was already so weak and skinny even after eating so much, if she made her diet, wouldn't her child end up a fragile bean sprout? Better to let her eat as she likes — it's not like the Ling household had any problem supplying that much food.

From then onwards, no one ever contested Ling Lan's appetite again. In the end, whenever Ling Lan ate just a little bit less than usual, such as skipping out on a bowl of fried rice or a steak, the entire Ling household would descend into a panic. The young master's appetite had weakened! Could it be that he was ill... Eh-hm, habit was certainly a powerful thing.

Ling Lan herself was very puzzled at her own condition, and so quietly asked Little Four to investigate.

Reliable as ever, Little Four soon provided an answer.

The reason Ling Lan was so trim and skinny compared to the other children who received agent injections was that the 'bulk' put on by those children was actually a physical symptom of the accumulation of impurities within their bodies. Of course, this result was not an entirely bad thing. On the plus side, it indirectly strengthened the physical toughness of a child's body, making it able to withstand a certain level of impact. On the flip side, it would decrease a child's flexibility and lower the body's resilience.

Meanwhile, the agent Ling Lan was absorbing contained no impurities due to Little Four's interference, so there was no build-up of impurities within her body, and consequently no physical bulk.

As for Ling Lan's large appetite, it was due to Ling Lan's training in advanced physical skills within her mind-space. The training sapped a lot of energy, so Ling Lan had no choice but to increase her intake of food to replenish the energy used. Part of this could also be explained by the Ling family's secret medicinal formula... it had increased the storage capacity of Ling Lan's body so that it could store the energy from two bowls of rice in the same space others needed to store one bowl's worth of energy.

Naturally, the more energy stored up by the body, the greater the energy potential... the long and short of it was that it was advantageous for Ling Lan.

As for why Ling Lan seemed weak and fragile... Little Four was unsure. He searched for a long time before cautiously suggesting that the Qi exercises Ling Lan had learned in her past life were to blame.

After getting these answers from Little Four, Ling Lan was reassured. As long as there was no harm, Ling Lan didn't mind becoming a glutton, especially since she could indulge her taste buds at the same time.

However, Ling Lan's pleasant days of pure feasting and sleeping didn't last very long. Soon, she had been mercilessly thrown into training under Chamberlain Ling Qin by her mother. Apparently, at five years old, it was time for her to start learning the hereditary Ling family martial arts.

On the very first day, Ling Lan already caught a glimpse of the hard days ahead. The Ling family martial arts were of the harsh variety — there were no shortcuts, all

improvements could only be achieved through hard training. A quota of punches and kicks had to be completed every day, or else no rest was allowed.

When Ling Lan finally finished her last kick for the day, she immediately dropped to the ground, immobile. Ling Nanyi, who had been standing watch by her side, picked her up tenderly and brought her directly to the hidden room for her medicinal bath, in hopes that it would soothe Ling Lan's exhausted muscles.

The moment Ling Lan entered the medicinal bath, she knew that something was different with today's bath. There was no pain at all, only a tingling warmth which was so comfortable that she was almost lulled to sleep.

Little Four chose to pipe up at this moment, saying derisively, *"This physical skill set is no match for the learning space's — it can easily cause problems for the body. If it weren't for this medicinal bath, any child who practised it would be damaged beyond repair."*

Ling Lan chuckled bitterly. "It's not like I can choose not to practise it. I have no choice but to continue. I really don't want to see the disappointed faces of the old couple." In her past life, Ling Lan had seen disappointment too many times on her parents' faces. So now, whenever she was on the verge of giving up, the disappointment that would appear in Ling Qin and Ling Nanyi's eyes would change her mind, giving her another boost of determination to hang on.

This was truly self-inflicted! Even though Ling Lan knew this was one of her personal demons, she just couldn't throw off the influence of her past life so easily.

After the bath, Little Four found that the damage caused by the training to Ling Lan's body had not been completely repaired by the medicinal concoction. Although the problem was relatively minor right now, it was a seed that would grow into a serious affliction if things continued as they were.

Thus, Little Four planned to convince Ling Lan to find a way to skip tomorrow's training. However, early the next day, to his immense shock, he found that all the remaining damage he had sensed the day before had disappeared without a trace. In fact, Ling Lan's body was in a better condition than it had been even before the damage was inflicted.

In disbelief, Little Four scrambled to ask Ling Lan what she had done the night before.

Ling Lan was befuddled, unsure what Little Four was asking for.

Little Four frantically clarified that he needed to know what Ling Lan had done the night before besides sleep.

This was indeed relatively important. If he could find out the cause, it would be a revolutionary discovery. Even in the technologically advanced world he came from, it was impossible to fully repair damage to the body with just medicinal solutions. Full repair required some sort of equivalent sacrifice, such as a reduction of life force or cell energy. Although these sort of sacrifices had no discernible negative effect in the short term, they would cause endless trouble in the long run.

Ling Lan's situation was entirely different, however. Somehow, she had managed to achieve a full recovery without any sort of sacrifice. Her life force had not been weakened but had instead grown even stronger, while the stored energy within her body was even richer than before. All of this was proof that Ling Lan did not draw on any of her body's resources to repair the damage.

Ling Lan thought the matter over seriously before hesitantly telling Little Four that she might have practised her Qi exercises right before bed.

At her response, Little Four insisted that Ling Lan continue to attend today's training, and to follow it up with the Qi exercises at night.

The results proved that Little Four's suspicions were correct. As expected, the circulation of energy prompted by the Qi exercises once again repaired the body to its optimum condition, just as it did the first day. Little Four watched the entire process in awe. Who'd have thought that a primitive planet with fledgling technology would have such a miraculous thing? The Qi exercises not only had the ability to nourish the body's life force, but could also incorporate a portion of the body's energy into its active circuit to improve and maintain the body in such a way that would go undetected by technological means.

Little Four could only 'see' it now because Ling Lan was his host so they were sharing spiritual energy. Otherwise, he would never have believed that such a hidden wonder actually existed in the world.

Little Four felt a smidgen of regret. If only he had known that primitive world had such wondrous things, he would have paid more attention and started gathering them from

the very beginning. Unfortunately, it was all too late now...

Chapter 22

A Life Free From Debt!

A year's time went by quickly, and Ling Lan was soon about to turn six. Ling Lan who had always complained that time moved too slowly was now singing a different tune, complaining that time was moving too fast instead.

Since she had officially started learning the Ling family martial arts at the age of five, Ling Lan had been able to freely practise the Body Refining Nine Stances. In this one year's time, she had managed to achieve three times more than what she had managed in the previous three and a half years — before the age of five, she had only barely mastered the fourth stance, but she had mastered the following three stances after that within this past year. It should be noted that the Body Refining Nine Stances only got harder the further you progressed, each stance requiring even more time and effort to master than the stance before it.

Unfortunately, Ling Lan did not have any room to relax despite that. In fact, her stress levels only increased from that point onwards. The deadline for her to master the Body Refining Nine Stances was fast approaching — she only had six months left, and she had yet to master the eighth stance, not to mention the even more challenging ninth stance.

She desperately wished that she could squeeze every second of her day into training, even holding combat poses during meal times and inhaling her food at top speed so she could get back to training sooner. This greatly dismayed her mother Lan Luofeng, who began to tearfully repent before a photo of Ling Lan's father. She felt that she had failed her husband by not raising their child right — Ling Lan had none of the decorum and grace of an established family clan member.

Amidst this chaos, the final deadline arrived. Although Ling Lan had successfully mastered the eighth stance, the ninth stance was still incomplete despite her best efforts.

Ling Lan really did not want to face Instructor Number One. Unfortunately, the learning space was merciless and would not allow Ling Lan to escape. The moment the timer hit zero, Ling Lan's consciousness had been dragged into the learning space.

When she entered the learning space for her physical skills course, the first thing she noticed was that the air seemed colder than usual. Instructor Number One was already standing in wait, his posture razor sharp, and he seemed to have been waiting for a long time.

Ling Lan rubbed her arms, trying to get her goose bumps to subside. It was impossible for Ling Lan to hold her composure against the menacing cold air emanating from such a formidable warrior.

Number One's aura was currently much, much colder compared to the other two times Ling Lan had met him. Even though his eyes maintained their usual calm, not a ripple of emotion in sight, Ling Lan could still clearly read the signs of Number One's deep displeasure.

Crap, Number One must be very unhappy with her performance this time. Ling Lan's sense of danger was very healthy — she immediately adopted a serious manner, head bowed and eyes lowered as she said, "Instructor Number One, I'm sorry, I've disappointed you."

Number One replied coolly, "There's no need for that. We are only here to guide and instruct. Whether or not you appreciate it means nothing to us. You are apologizing to the wrong person."

Although Number One said all this with his usual indifference and aloofness, Ling Lan could feel the underlying dissatisfaction running through his response.

Ling Lan felt like crying. Oh Instructor Number One, what do you really mean? What do you want me to do?

Although Ling Lan was complaining internally, her face showed none of this as she kept her head bowed in respectful silence.

Ultimately, Ling Lan was actually feeling somewhat guilty. She had really wasted a lot of time in the first three years of the given timeline. She had not practised seriously

back then, although a large part of it could be blamed on her wariness of her watchful guardians in the Ling household. During that time, she would only practise in the depths of the night while her mother was sleeping, thus only managing about five to six hours of training each day. This greatly hobbled the speed of her progress. Although she had been free to train as much as she wanted after she started her training in the Ling family martial arts, she had not been able to make up for the time she had wasted in those first three years.

"Training in the Body Refining Nine Stances. Eight stances mastered, mastery of the ninth stance at 69 percent. Mission incomplete. Punishment options: One, a deduction of 200 honour points, lacking points can be compensated with other options. Two, corporal punishment, 200 jolts of electric shock! Three, exchange honour points for an extension of the deadline, punishment will be doubled if mission is still unable to be completed. Please make your choice!"

The learning space announced all of Ling Lan's punishment options in its unforgiving flat tone. The options were both a shock and a relief to Ling Lan. What shocked her was the harshness of the punishments — between the large deduction of honour points, and the shocking corporal punishment, she did not want to choose either unless she had no other choice. Honour points had proven to be supremely precious, so she was unwilling to lose them this way, while the corporal punishment was... ahem, ahem, she really had no masochistic tendencies...

On the other hand, Ling Lan was relieved that the system provided a chance for her to fix the situation. The only catch was the possible doubling of the current punishment — just thinking about it made Ling Lan's little heart shudder in terror, and she could feel a chill creeping up her spine.

Tone icy, Number One asked, "Speak. Which do you choose?"

Ling Lan asked carefully, "Instructor Number One, could you please explain the third option to me?" If she did not have to spend much honour points in exchange, she was willing to try it.

Number One gave her a cool look as he said in clipped tones, "You can use 10 honour points to extend your deadline by 30 days. In those 30 days, you may continue to practise the Body Refining Nine Stances. If you can master it in that time frame, the punishment will be cancelled. If you fail, the punishment will be doubled."

Ling Lan's heart leapt. 10 honour points were an acceptable loss in her opinion, although it was a little harder to decide whether she could really master the final ninth stance within 30 days. Truthfully, Ling Lan was not at all confident of her chances — she may really only need one more month to master the stance, but she could just as easily require two months or three months, or perhaps even one more year. Ling Lan remembered very well that Instructor Number Nine had told her that mastering the ninth stance required a certain degree of chance and enlightenment; mastery would be impossible without one or the other.

Should she take the risk and try? Ling Lan hesitated, but in the end, she just could not sacrifice the precious honour points she had earned, nor could she convince herself to take the corporal punishment, so she decided to take the plunge and chose the third option.

The moment Ling Lan stated her choice, she felt the temperature of the room rise to a more comfortable degree. Number One decisively processed her choice for her, and before Ling Lan could ask any more questions, she had been summarily kicked out of the physical skills learning area.

All Ling Lan could remember was a final cold stare, full of threat — a clear warning that she had better complete her mission properly this time.

Back at the general learning space, Ling Lan did not even spare the time to greet Little Four before hurrying back out to the real world to train.

Although Ling Lan had no idea what Number One's final threat-filled gaze was meant to convey, she knew down to her very bones that if she did not manage to master the Body Refining Nine Stances by this new deadline, she would die a very gruesome death...

And so, Ling Lan trained like a demon possessed in the subsequent month. Every day, she would train until she only had enough energy left to keep breathing before she dared to stop. Under this brutal routine, Ling Lan finally succeeded in mastering the ninth stance.

When Ling Lan entered the physical skills learning space and found that there was only ten seconds left till the deadline, she broke out into a cold sweat. Honestly, till the

very last moment, she herself was unsure whether she would be able to complete the mission in time. All she could think of was to keep circulating her internal energy, and push her body into the motions of the Body Refining Nine Stances over and over again.

A rather stupid approach perhaps, but this reckless method may have led to the final push that Ling Lan needed. Ling Lan had trained to the point where her consciousness had started to blur, when she felt like a mental wall on the edge of her mind had crumbled. Her body had started going through all the poses of the Body Refining Nine Stances involuntarily, imprinting all the hard work she had put into learning the nine stances firmly into her body.

Just like that, Ling Lan resolved the sword of Damocles [1] hanging by her neck, and finally returned to a life free from debt.

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[1] Having a sword of Damocles over you means you're facing an imminent threat, usually one involving great peril.

Chapter 23

The Scout Academy's Test

"Little Young Master, are you ready?" Standing before the room where the strength test was taking place, Ling Qin's expression was even more nervous than Ling Lan's who was about to be tested.

Ling Lan's lips twitched. This grandpa chamberlain had completely lost his usual calm ever since they had entered the scout academy. Did he really have such little faith in her?

Uh... well of course there were things that were out of her control, like, who knew that the test of intelligence would be so incomprehensible...

Recalling her shame in that part of the test, Ling Lan's face darkened. Still, to reassure her grandpa chamberlain who truly loved her from the depths of his heart, she said, "Relax, Grandpa Qin. I promise I will complete the mission."

If not out of sincere worry for her, why would Ling Qin lose his usual composure? He was a trained combat expert!

At her words, Ling Qin seemed put at ease. "That'll do, that'll do."

Ling Lan was standing here now because it was finally time for little Ling Lan to enter a scout academy. According to Federation law, every child must enrol at a scout academy at the age of six, and receive ten years of mandatory schooling there.

So even if Lan Luofeng was reluctant, she had no choice but to bring Ling Lan to the scout academy to take the enrolment tests which would decide which class she would be in.

There were four parts to the enrolment tests — intelligence, strength, stamina, and speed.

The first part, the intelligence test, was easy. It was so easy that most did not even consider it a real test, as all they did was let the child being tested talk to the appointed

examiner for 3 to 5 minutes, and then the results were out.

Ling Lan only scored 80 marks in this test. Placed among the sea of 90 marks scored by the other children, this score was humiliating, leaving Ling Lan speechless. Till now, she still could not figure out how her mature mentality honed over 30 over years of life had lost to the intelligence of those 6 year old brats. How did that even make sense? Who knew how those examiners determined the scores — there did not seem to be any basis whatsoever.

Regardless of how wronged Ling Lan felt, she had no choice but to accept this result. According to regulations, any objections about scoring could only be raised after all parts of the enrolment test had been completed.

The second test was the test of strength. Ling Lan grimly swore that she would redeem herself in the following tests. No way would she let those little brats continue to beat her. The learning space in her mind was no joke!

Finally, Ling Lan's name was called. As she prepared herself to enter the testing room, Ling Qin pressed lightly on Ling Lan's little shoulder. "Do you remember what the mistress told you? You must not disappoint the mistress!"

Lan Luofeng was waiting for them outside the academy. Perhaps worried that her agitation would affect Ling Lan's performance, she had decided to remain outside and wait for them to come tell her the final results.

Ling Lan obediently nodded her head. "Yes, Ling Lan will do it. Mummy should relax, Uncle Qin too." Acting cute was rather embarrassing, but this was the only way to reassure these people who loved and cared for her, so Ling Lan had learned to ignore her shame and just do it.

Under Ling Qin's fond gaze, Ling Lan stepped into the examination room.

In the area set aside for the strength test, two soldiers in military uniforms were seated in one of the rooms. One of the officers was flipping through Ling Lan's intelligence test results and its accompanying examiner comments. The shockingly low 80 marks stood out starkly, causing him to frown, but he could not help but exclaim in surprise when he saw the examiner comments written below it.

Curious at his partner's reaction, the other officer asked, "What's up?"

"Calm and collected, no sign of leaps of logic, lacking imagination... we've been in charge of testing children for almost three years, but I don't think we've seen these sort of comments before."

After listening to these comments, the other officer said with some dissatisfaction, "I'm not going to comment on the rest, but what's wrong with calm and collected? In battle, only the calm survive. Isn't this scoring a bit ridiculous?"

"Who do you think is in charge of intelligence testing? They would never let this sort of child who's hard to brainwash and hard to win over into the special classes and waste their resources." The officer who had read out the comments curled his lips, full of scorn for the examiners of the intelligence testing.

"Hehe, that's true. Those great clans are only concerned with recruiting talent for their clans for their own profit, having long forgotten about the good of the Federation. Quite a few promising talents have been shunted into the regular classes because of them, losing the chance to be cultivated with better resources, and in doing so losing the Federation some great talent," the other officer said with some regret. Unfortunately, those people had both power and authority, and held a lot of influence and decisive power. For example, they have claimed priority in arranging the enrolment classes of the scout academy, letting them place students loyal to them in the better classes. The other common soldiers involved in the process were powerless even if they wanted to help some of the unaffiliated talents.

"Hopefully this child will perform better in the following tests, or else he will have no hope of getting into Special Class-A."

"Class-A? He should thank his lucky stars if he gets into Class-B. He might just end up being pushed into one of the regular classes..." The other officer did not think highly of Ling Lan's chances with such a low intelligence score.

"Hello, examiners. Ling Lan is here for testing," said Ling Lan loudly. When she had entered the room, the two officers were in deep whispering conversation, so she had walked up till she was about 2 meters from them before standing at attention and announcing her presence.

"Oh, he's got presence." One of the officers laughed. They were used to seeing nervous and timid children, so it was rather refreshing to meet one so brash and unafraid.

At heart, Ling Lan was an adult, and she had also had to withstand Instructor Number One's terrifying killing aura more than once — the weak presence of the two officers before her was really no threat at all in her eyes.

The other officer smiled kindly, and pointed over to a row of barbells at one corner of the room, saying, "Lift the barbell that you can lift. Don't force yourself. This is just a test, not a competition."

Hearing this, Ling Lan nodded. She walked over to the barbells, and saw that each barbell was labelled with their weight. Ling Lan knew her body well — she had finished learning the foundational stage of the Ling family martial arts, and had now moved on to train in combat techniques, so she was very clear on the limits of her strength.

Ling Lan did not choose immediately, but turned to ask, "Could you tell me which weight would give full marks?" Her abysmal intelligence score meant that Ling Lan needed to get as much marks as she could in the remaining three tests, because she just had to qualify for the special classes. This was also the mission given to her by her mom.

It wasn't that Lan Luofeng wanted the glory, but only those students enrolled in the special classes had the right to build their own study plans, select their preferred instructors, and choose to stay at home. For the sake of protecting Ling Lan's secret, this was the only option.

The two officers glanced at each other. This child was certainly full of himself — even now they would not dare to claim that they could lift 500 catties ¹. And this child wanted to take on the 100 marks challenge?

"500 catties!" one of the officers finally replied.

At this, Ling Lan strolled over casually to stand before the 500-catty barbell. She clenched her fists over the bar, considering — 500 catties was already slightly over her best established record. If she were to brute-force it, she could be injured if she was unlucky. Still, Ling Lan wanted to try. After all, it was not like there was no chance of success, and she had her reliable Qi exercises to fall back on if she really did get injured, so she was not afraid of the consequences.

Of course, another reason why Ling Lan wanted to try was that the strength test was

a section where points were easy to get. The marks in this section were all objective — how much you could lift equalled how much score you would get, unlike in the following tests of stamina and speed where there was some room for interpretation. Although Ling Lan also had confidence for the next two tests, she was also wary of inexplicably losing marks again like in the intelligence test.

Still, Ling Lan would not recklessly go ahead and lift the barbell. She wanted to protect her body as much as she could, so she surreptitiously circulated her Qi once and filled her entire body with energy. Only then did she grab hold of the bar with all her might, lifting up the barbell with a mighty bellow.

She waited till the monitor rang out with the signal sound of success before placing the barbell down again. The heavy thud of the barbell hitting the floor roused the dumbfounded officers from their stupor.

"He really did it..."The two officers' shock and disbelief were writ all over their faces. One of them even ran over to the monitor display to take a closer look. When he saw the distinct word of 'SUCCESS' on the screen, he was instantly too excited for words.

"Who'd have thought that after three years, I'd have a candidate come out of my hands with a full strength score." The officer was both moved and proud — this wasn't the intelligence test, where the score could be manipulated due to its black-box workings. This result was a direct reflection of strength. He was actually witness to the birth of a new combat genius! (The higher the strength, the easier training would be — approximately half the effort for the same results.)

The two officers wrote down Ling Lan's score with excitement and added their comments at the bottom. Their comment consisted of only two words: Combat genius! Only these two words could represent what they felt at this very moment.

In their excitement, they did not notice Ling Lan's strange pensive expression when she put down the barbell. Of course Ling Lan was puzzled — she actually still had strength to spare when she lifted the barbell. She had initially thought that 500 catties would be a little beyond her limits, but when she actually lifted the weight, it was rather easy.

Gee, could it be that she had eaten some sort of strength-enhancing pill without her knowledge?

Unable to figure it out, Ling Lan could only let it go for now as she walked out of the room and got ready for the next test.

Chapter 24

The Overly Friendly Little Boy

Ling Lan assumed that the following tests would still be conducted individually, but unexpectedly, she found that that wasn't the case when she arrived at the site of the next test.

Both the stamina test and the speed test would be held at the same place — the academy's large field.

When Ling Lan and Ling Qin arrived at the field and tried to enter, Ling Qin was immediately stopped by one of the waiting staff members at the entrance. He told them that parents and guardians were not allowed to accompany their child into the testing area.

Ling Lan did not need Ling Qin's company to begin with; she had only let him tag along since she wasn't able to refuse his kind intentions. Now, seeing Ling Qin's worried eyes, she hurried to reassure him before saying a firm goodbye and entering the field. These thoughtful actions were noted by the staff member escorting Ling Lan into the field.

"You are surprisingly considerate..." praised the staff member. Among the many children who came for testing, he had seen many who cried and fussed, threw tantrums, or clung to their guardians — in contrast, Ling Lan's mature handling of the situation amazed him.

Ling Lan merely smiled without saying anything in reply. She couldn't very well say that she was already over 30 years old, which was why she wasn't going to cling to her parents like other children, right?

Ling Lan's calm and even-tempered attitude may have endeared her to the staff member, for he decided to provide an explanation as he pointed out the other children waiting ahead on the field grounds. "There are the children waiting to be tested. That group on the far right with less people is the commoner children, the middle group consists of children from military backgrounds, while the largest group on the left is made up of the descendants of the elite families."

Ling Lan looked towards where he pointed, and saw that there were already a lot of people gathered on the grass, all of whom were children enrolling for the year.

On the planet of Doha, there were countless scout academies just like this one; however, the one Ling Lan was trying to enrol in was reputed to be the best in Doha, with no close competition. Just to qualify for the enrolment tests, one had to either be from an elite family or a military family with a reserved spot, or else they would have to be like Ling Lan, who was an inheritor of premium military benefits. Those who inherited premium military benefits could come from commoner families, elite families, or even military systems, so the children on the field had knowingly or unknowingly drifted into three distinct camps.

Of course, if any of them failed the enrolment tests here, they would have to settle for the scout academy closest to their residence. This was the harsh reality of the matter — the Central Scout Academy of the Planet of Doha only accepted the best; they would not lower their standards just to boost their enrolment rates.

However, it should be noted that a large majority of the children who failed were those from the commoner families. The academy had released a statement to the public explaining that these children's physical fitness was not up to the academy's standards. Whether that was true or if there was something fishy behind the matter, we will never know.

Because every year, this academy which claimed to only accept the best would still open two 'Exception Classes' for enrolment... to qualify, you'd have to have wealth, power, and status!

Ling Lan knew the staff member was trying to help her, so she responded with a bright smile. "Thank you!"

It should be noted that Ling Lan had a beautiful smile. This smile had been deeply ingrained into her bones, and as long as someone treated her well and with sincerity, she would be generous with it. In her past life, this smile had earned her the good will and affection of all the doctors and nurses who had treated her. And now, combined with the attractive face born from her good genes in this life, the sweetness of her smile had only intensified.

The staff member stared for a long moment, besotted. And then, he rubbed his nose lightly, peering around to the left and right. When he saw that no one else was paying

attention, he said to her, "Little boy, don't smile like that in the future. It's for your own good."

If this child did not have enough social and political clout, it was better if he was more careful with his smile. Perhaps it wasn't as dangerous now due to his young age, but in another five or ten years, this smile of his could very well be a problem.

Ling Lan was taken aback by this unexpected advice. But before she could ask about it, they had arrived at the fringes of the crowd and it was no longer safe to ask. Ling Lan could only wave goodbye under the staff member's fond and worried gaze.

"Little Four, what do you think that person wanted to say?" asked Ling Lan with a slight frown on her face.

Little Four said nothing, but played a recording of Ling Lan's previous smile within her mind. Till now, Ling Lan had never seen her current smile, though she knew that her original smile had been sweet enough to make people lower their guard and ease their spirits. However, looking at her smile now... she finally understood why that staff member had tried to warn her.

Dammit, looks like beauty is also a burden. In the past, she could only be considered pretty at most, with a sweet smile that could warm people's hearts. But now, her androgynous appearance and her very attractive face somehow made that same sweet smile even sweeter, adding an almost seductive quality to it. And this was still as a six year old, if she were a little older...

Ling Lan was not so naïve as to believe that gay relationships did not exist in this era. Although she was a girl in reality, she still did not want a gay man to confess feelings for her.

Right then and there, Ling Lan decided that she could never smile like that again.

As Ling Lan neared the three groups, the children in all the groups started looking over at her curiously. As mentioned earlier, Ling Lan was a really good-looking child — even among the multitude of handsome men and beautiful women in this world, she would still be considered a top-notch beauty. With the honesty of youth, the children directly expressed their appreciation of her beauty with their focused attention. A pretty child was always popular.

In this manner, before Ling Lan could decide which group she should join, a well-built

boy from the middle military group had started waving enthusiastically at her, shouting, "Here, here! Come quick!"

Ling Lan was nonplussed. Who the hell was this passionate fellow? He didn't look familiar to her at all.

Still, his greeting helped her solve one of her worries, so she started walking slowly in his direction. Her slow pace was intentional — what if she had mistaken his greeting when he had actually meant it for someone else behind her? She wanted to avoid that embarrassment if possible.

However, it was soon proven that Ling Lan's caution was unnecessary. That boy really had been calling out to her, because he had already run over to grab her hand in impatience before she had covered half the distance.

Ling Lan stared at the hand that covered her own with some consternation. Who the hell was he? How could he just grab her hand without asking as if they were familiar friends?

Hehe, don't judge Ling Lan for her reaction. In the history of both of her lives, this was the first time a strange man, erm... little boy, had held her hand. Our intrepid little student Ling Lan was actually feeling shy.

They entered the group to the place the boy had run out from, but before the boy could say anything, a sulky voice could be heard saying, "Qi Long, who's he?"

Ling Lan looked towards the voice and saw that it was a plump little girl who had spoken. The girl glared at her fiercely, as if she had taken away her favourite possession.

Ling Lan was rendered speechless once again. Did all children in this time go through puberty so early? This girl had already learned how to be jealous? That aside, shouldn't she take a closer look before getting jealous? Couldn't she see that 'he' was a little boy right now?

Ling Lan was also a little puzzled, as she felt that she probably looked better than Qi Long in her current body. Why did the plump little girl not seem to notice this, but had chosen without question to be jealous of her instead of wanting to get close to her? Could it be that she was just not the girl's type?

What Ling Lan did not know was that this world was no longer like her previous world where leanness was considered attractive. Here, the children were all raised with the understanding that stoutness, bulk, and health were beautiful, so Ling Lan's weak and fragile beansprout look was not going to appeal to most of the female population, no matter how attractive her features were.

Qi Long had no idea that his little follower was jealous, focusing instead on introducing Ling Lan to his friends, "He was the one who was being tested before me in the strength test. Don't look down on him 'cause he's skinny, he's really strong!" Qi Long liked to befriend those who he felt were stronger than him, as he felt that he could become stronger by mingling with them.

Ling Lan blinked. So that's how Qi Long knew her.

Chapter 25

Companions in the Same Group

Ling Lan couldn't suppress her curiosity. "How did you find out?" The results were supposed to be confidential, only known by the examiners. Also, those examiners had been enlisted from various military regions, and so knew how to keep their mouths shut.

With some embarrassment, Qi Long replied, "Actually, when I went in for my test, the two examiners were talking about you, saying that you were a rare genius with unparalleled strength. I figured that if even the examiners said so, your strength must be ginormous!"

Fine, looks like the examiners got carried away in their excitement and accidentally revealed some hints. But this gregarious fellow was also surprisingly observant, having managed to grab hold of the most important information immediately.

"Oh right! What's your name? I'm Qi Long, he's Han Jiyun. We grew up together, and he's the bestest of my best friends." Qi Long had no sense of the typical first-time reservations when meeting strangers; he had jumped straight into an enthusiastic introduction of the little boy standing beside the plump little girl. His expression as he spoke seemed as if he were showing off, causing Ling Lan to throw a curious glance at this boy who Qi Long seemed proud to know.

The little boy seemed very serious, giving no outward reaction to Qi Long's enthusiasm other than to slightly nod at Ling Lan, although his eyes held an unmistakable trace of appraisal. Of course, this was due to his young age — if he had been just a bit older, he might have been able to do so more subtly.

However, his assessing gaze did not make Ling Lan uncomfortable, because Ling Lan knew that he meant no harm by it, and that he was only trying to decide if Ling Lan was someone worthy of being befriended by his good friend Qi Long. Thus, Ling Lan was instead touched by this act of concern, proof of the deep friendship between the two boys.

Looking at the beaming Qi Long standing at her side, Ling Lan recalled the novels she

had read in the past. So it was true that every happy-go-lucky boy would have a cautious and thoughtful bro by his side — even now, she could see the strong bromance between the two little boys... God was indeed fair and kind, and would protect those who were pure of heart.

As her impression of Qi Long and Han Jijyun rose, Ling Lan's demeanour softened considerably. She greeted Han Jijyun amicably, "Hello, I'm Ling Lan, it's nice to meet you."

"Ling Lan, she is Jijyun's younger cousin Han Xuya. She always likes to hang out with us, don't take her words too seriously." Qi Long did not wait for Jijyun to respond, interrupting to introduce the plump little girl.

Qi Long did not notice that his words had irritated the plump little girl so much that she was gnashing her teeth, while Han Jijyun threw a somewhat apologetic look at Ling Lan. Looks like he was used to playing the mediator for his best friend and his cousin sister.

Ling Lan smiled but did not respond in any way to Qi Long's words. This somewhat placated the angry little girl, who felt that that Ling Lan at least knew his place, and as such didn't find him as annoying as before. The emotions of girls were truly a fickle thing, regardless of their age.

And so the group of children conversed like they were little adults, but they hadn't conversed for long before they heard one of the other children yell out, "The exam is starting!"

It turned out that the examiner for this test had appeared on the field, and the staff members had begun separating the children into smaller groups.

The way they grouped the children was simple — according to their registration number, every ten numbers became one group. Ling Lan looked at her number, 7253, and then turned to look at the numbers of the children in Qi Long's group, and was immediately struck dumb. Dammit, wasn't this too coincidental?! Their numbers turned out to be right behind hers — 7254, 7255, 7256...

Ignoring Qi Long's excitement, Han Jijyun's surprise, and Han Xuya's mild discomfort, Ling Lan could do nothing but look up at the sky, the corners of her mouth twitching. Was this the rumoured Laws of Dimension Travel? Would anyone fated to connect

with her be naturally drawn to gather around her? Just like how Qi Long had just bulldozed his way into her life?

Besides the four of them, the six other people who belonged in their group had also gathered around them. This was only natural as their group had the most people to begin with, so the others who were scattered had automatically come to join up with the largest party.

The newcomers consisted of five boys and one girl, and one of the boys looked very similar to the girl, so they were probably twins.

Although there were hardly any ugly people left at this time, the twins were still extremely good-looking by current standards. They were like porcelain dolls, with clear skins glowing with health — the boy looked dignified and confident, while the girl looked shy and adorable. Two almost identical faces with two distinctly different dispositions — Ling Lan couldn't help but steal a few extra looks.

Ling Lan's gaze was perhaps a bit too intent, for the twins seemed to sense it and looked over. The princess-like girl smiled at Ling Lan bashfully, which Ling Lan returned on reflex. When the boy saw this, he glared at Ling Lan, as if warning her not to even think about flirting with his sister.

Ling Lan rubbed at her nose, speechless. Fine, so she had been labelled as a little lecher with just one smile. Still, wasn't this little boy's guard a little too high at this age? Wasn't it a little too early to even worry about defending his sister's honour from lechers?

Qi Long noticed the boy's glares, and glared back fiercely in return as he tried to comfort Ling Lan, "Ling Lan, don't mind it. Luo Lang's just like that, his sister is the centre of his universe."

Looks like Qi Long was also familiar with the twins, or else he wouldn't have been able to call out the boy's name so easily.

Ling Lan said helplessly, "Oh, so he has a sister complex! A sis-con!"

"Sis-con?!" Qi Long paused for a moment, bemused, before bursting out into laughter. "Ling Lan, you're just too talented. How did you manage to describe it so perfectly? Sis-con... why didn't I think of that?"

Qi Long's exaggerated reaction surprised Ling Lan. The term 'sis-con' had been so popular back in Ling Lan's original world that it had almost become a cliché, so almost everyone knew it. Who knew that it didn't exist in this generation...?

A thought rose up in Ling Lan's mind. Could it be that, over the years, due to several catastrophes and major disasters, there had been some heavy losses in culture? In that case, the books and other reading materials Little Four had saved might truly be an invaluable pot of gold...

Qi Long's unusual reaction piqued the interest of the other children, who quickly asked him what was going on. Soon, the term 'sis-con' spread like wildfire among the kids, until everyone in the group except the twins had learned about it, and were giggling behind their hands.

Though they tried to hide it, their laughter was still obvious enough that Luo Lang, the male twin, couldn't pretend not to see it. His face grew darker and darker, until finally, he could bear it no longer and went right up to Ling Lan to ask, "Hey, what bad things did you say about us?"

Ling Lan, face full of angelic innocence, pointed at herself and said, "Me? Say bad things about you? Why would I do that?" She wasn't even laughing with the others — if he was looking for someone to blame, shouldn't he look for Qi Long? Without his big mouth, how would the other children have found out and started laughing at Luo Lang?

"Then why are they laughing at me?" accused Luo Lang angrily. He had seen very clearly that the whole thing had started with Ling Lan. It was Ling Lan's words that caused Qi Long and the others to start laughing at them.

Ling Lan really didn't know what to do with this accusation. "...Do you have paranoia syndrome?"

"Paranoia syndrome..." Pfft, stifled laughter once again broke out from behind her. From the moment Luo Lang started talking to Ling Lan, the other children had been paying attention to them, and as expected, they once again heard something really interesting. They discovered that this weak-looking little fellow before them was a great wordsmith, using strange terms they had never heard of before but which fit perfectly with the situation, causing them to laugh uncontrollably. Heavens, he was really too talented.

Qi Long was laughing the hardest, while even Han Jijyun couldn't help but smile like the kid he was, breaking up his usual serious façade.

This new bout of laughter made Luo Lang even angrier. He pointed at them all, so angry that he couldn't even speak — Ling Lan heartlessly wondered if he would get angry enough to faint.

Chapter 26

The Exam Begins

It was evident that the physical endurance of the bodies of children in this time period was very high. No matter how angry Luo Lang was, his stance was still tall and steady. The only sign of his building anger was the stormy expression on his face.

Seeing Luo Lang's expression, Ling Lan felt a little bad. After all, she was already over 30 years old if you counted the span of both her lives, which meant she could already be considered a weird auntie of sorts — how could she bully a young child like this?

A little remorsefully, Ling Lan smiled at Luo Lang and said, "I was just joking. Please don't be mad."

Ling Lan's smile startled Luo Lang, and her sudden submissive attitude also threw him for a loop. He stood there gaping, nonplussed, and the other children burst out laughing once again. There was no helping it really, for his bewildered look was just too adorable — even his sister had started giggling softly. She quickly stifled it, however, and lowered her head bashfully, chastising herself mentally for her actions. How could she laugh at her brother who had always watched out for her?

Meanwhile, Ling Lan was having a headache over her reflexive smile. It was so troublesome. After she had accidentally revealed her 'seductive' smile once again, Little Four had gone ballistic, and she now had her hands full trying to calm him down.

Leaving Ling Lan aside, who was busy with the ballistic Little Four, Luo Lang had been shaken out of his stupor by the others' laughter. When he found that he had once again embarrassed himself, two splotches of red flushed over his ivory skin, spreading all the way to the roots of his ears.

Then, he channelled his embarrassment into anger and lunged at Ling... uh, Ling Lan's side where Qi Long was standing, and pushed him to the ground. Just like that, the two of them began to wrestle as they rolled around on the field.

Qi Long and Luo Lang were all tangled up with one another — Qi Long's friend Han Jijyun did not try to help, only pulling Ling Lan and Han Xuya aside to watch as they

fought. Meanwhile, Luo Lang's sister had also silently retreated a few steps out of the way, but she continued to watch her brother with worried eyes.

With some difficulty, Ling Lan finally managed to calm Little Four, only to return to awareness to find that no one was trying to stop the fight. This baffled Ling Lan. In her past world, if any children started to fight, they would be pulled apart as soon as possible to resolve their problems peacefully. But here, although there were staff members on the field not far from them, they just continued with what they were doing as if nothing was happening — what exactly was going on? Ling Lan felt that her world view was being challenged by this new world's order.

Ling Lan was not someone who could suppress her curiosity. She immediately turned to ask Han Jijyun about the situation, earning yet another appraising gaze from him. However, when he saw that Ling Lan really did not understand what was going on, he was rather stunned. This was pretty basic general knowledge that should have been taught by a father. Had Ling Lan's father not told him about it?

Even though Han Jijyun had his doubts, he still explained to Ling Lan, "This is a habit we've learned since we were little. If we need to resolve a problem with someone, fighting is permitted. However, no matter who wins or loses, the matter is considered closed after the fight."

What a strange way of educating their children... are they not afraid of encouraging violence? Once again Ling Lan was struck by how different the values and principles of her previous education were compared to the survival of the fittest mentality of this world. For example, no matter the origins of a child – whether he was a commoner, an elite, or a noble – the first ambition of all the children here was to join the military. The second ambition was also to join the military, and the third ambition... was still to join the military. Because strength was might, and military men were the strongest, especially if they managed to become a mecha operator. Only those whose bodies did not meet the requirements would give up on this dream of the military and reluctantly choose another profession.

Since young, the education Ling Lan received was geared towards preparing her to become a mecha operator, the strongest of the strong. Everything she learned worked towards this goal, while her mum and Chamberlain Ling Qin had never even thought to ask her whether she wanted to be one.

Honestly, she was rather apathetic towards the idea of becoming a mecha operator.

She was a girl, after all, with very little interest in fighting. She could never have guessed that she would travel to this warring world where the people were militarised, and, even more unexpectedly, that she would have a mecha learning device as a contracted follower...

Ling Lan couldn't help but rub her jaw thoughtfully. Could it be that this was fate? Was everything that had happened trying to tell her that she was destined to walk the path of a mecha operator?

Qi Long and Luo Lang were still fighting neck and neck — although Qi Long was actually slightly better in terms of fighting power, Luo Lang had stubborn determination on his side. So, although Luo Lang was slightly disadvantaged, he was still managing to hold his own against Qi Long.

Ling Lan really wanted to know the outcome of their fight, but when she saw that the staff member in charge of calling out the test groups was getting closer and closer to their numbers, she knew that there was no chance the fight would end in time. With some regret, she called out, "It looks like it'll be our turn soon. Are you guys sure it's alright to continue fighting like this?"

The two boys froze at the same time, but Luo Lang reacted faster than Qi Long. He shoved Qi Long aside and scrambled off the ground, and started to fix his clothing and appearance. Although he could no longer revert to his initial pristine princely presence no matter how hard he tried, his proper upbringing would not allow him to face the examiner in such a dishevelled state.

Qi Long was caught unprepared and was sent tumbling twice over by Luo Lang's push. He quickly clambered up as well and said huffily, "Wait till the test is over, let's continue our fight then." He was utterly unconcerned with his mussed up appearance, only swiping at his forehead twice to get rid of some sweat before letting it be.

Naturally, Luo Lang refused to back down as well, so the two agreed that they would determine the true winner after the testing ended.

Oh, such spirited and competitive young children! Ling Lan felt old, for she could not find any sense in their random fight. By this time, Ling Lan had forgotten that she was actually the culprit who instigated Luo Lang's fight with Qi Long.

The testing proceeded rapidly — Qi Long and Luo Lang had barely caught their breath

when their group was already being called up by the staff member. The ten people in Ling Lan's party dared not dawdle and quickly ran over.

The ten of them stood on the race track and made their final preparations. Then, an examiner walked over to explain how the testing would go. He asked them to get ready to run from the start line, and explained that they would have to safely arrive at the end line to complete this test. As for scoring, that would depend on how much time they took to complete the course.

As Ling Lan got ready, she did not forget to keep an eye on the group of testees before them. This was a habit she had developed after multiple encounters with Number One — every time Number One appeared, his every action could be a test, so Ling Lan always had to be on her toes, making sure she caught every little hint in his actions and his words. This strict caution had become a part of her basic instincts.

Ling Lan saw the previous group speed off at the examiner's command, and soon she could no longer see their silhouettes...

"Do you see it?" Han Jijyun leaned close and whispered to her. He had also noticed something strange.

"Hn, even though the sun is shining brightly in the sky, there is fog on the track..." Ling Lan pointed out the problem, which explained why the group before them had disappeared so quickly before their eyes.

"Looks like the track here is under some area-of-effect illusion technology — this test is not as straightforward as it seems." Han Jijyun was an intelligent boy who had a deep understanding of advanced technology which other kids (like Ling Lan) may not have.

Han Jijyun's warning made Ling Lan secretly raise her guard.

Very soon, the examiner at the starting line called Ling Lan's group over. Once he had confirmed they were ready, he gave the command, and they were off.

Qi Long immediately rushed forward at the head of the group, with Luo Lang close on his heels. It seemed like the two of them were determined to make a competition out of this as well.

Ling Lan was third, and Han Jijyun was right behind Ling Lan. This strategic child had the same idea as Ling Lan — they were planning to follow behind Qi Long for now as

they observed their surroundings. Meanwhile, the other kids were all following at various paces behind Han Jijyun.

Chapter 27

The True Intention of the Test

They hadn't run for long when the sunny skies above them turned dark and foreboding. Storm clouds gathered, and thunder rumbled ominously. Right at the front, Qi Long cursed, "Damn our luck! Why did it only start to rain when it's our turn? Hurry up, everyone, or else it'll be even harder to run once it really starts raining, and our results will definitely be affected."

After he finished speaking, Qi Long was just about to speed up when Han Jijyun called out from behind, "Long, don't speed up. Just keep your current pace."

Qi Long was confused. He didn't understand why Han Jijyun wanted to stop him from speeding up; if it really started to rain, they would have to expend much more energy running through the rain, and the rain would affect their speed as well... Their score in this test was based on how quickly they could arrive at the end point, so shouldn't they try to cover more ground now before it rained?

Although Qi Long's mind was full of doubts, one of his strengths was self-awareness. He knew that his blood-sworn brother Han Jijyun was much smarter than him, so much smarter that he could only look on in envy. Since his sworn brother had said so, there must be something that he missed — it had been proven enough times in the past that it was never wrong to listen to Han Jijyun, so he would put his faith in his brother.

And so Qi Long decisively dismissed his worries, and kept running at his original pace. It had to be said that none of the children in Ling Lan's group were particularly competitive in nature, other than Luo Lang. And although Luo Lang was prideful, he was also an intelligent boy, so when he heard Han Jijyun's advice to Qi Long, he also decided not to speed up, merely keeping pace behind Qi Long.

Among their peers, Han Jijyun's intelligence was publicly acknowledged. Even Luo Lang admired Han Jijyun for his intelligence, but unfortunately, Han Jijyun had befriended that idiot Qi Long before he could get to know him. He was full of regret that he had moved too slowly and felt that it was such a waste — if he had managed to get to Han Jijyun first, Qi Long would never have had a chance.

The other kids also maintained their original pace, keeping close to the group so that they weren't left behind. Anyone who could attend the enrolment tests of the Central Scout Academy of Doha was no idiot — Qi Long and Luo Lang's fight had shown them that the two were much stronger than them, so if the two of them weren't afraid of wasting time, why should they be afraid?

Han Jijyun quickened his steps to catch up to Ling Lan, and jogged by her side. In low tones, he asked, "Ling Lan, what do you think?" Han Jijyun's gut just told him that Ling Lan knew something.

"Didn't you already notice it yourself?" asked back Ling Lan with a wounded gaze. Dammit, this was truly what was meant by heaven-blessed. Han Jijyun was only six years old, but he was already observant enough to discover something wrong with the situation — she felt pitiful in comparison.

She had only noticed the problem thanks to her experience of two lifetimes, as well as the intensive training and trials provided the learning mind-space. This year especially, Ling Lan had been free of any specific training menu or missions, but had been tormented by Number One via all sorts of methods, causing her to view everything with suspicion now. Looking deeper into everything by at least several layers had become her default reaction.

Han Jijyun was oblivious of Ling Lan's hurt little soul, continuing in a stern manner, "Hn, it won't matter whether we speed up or not, what will come will come. Perhaps they want to see how we react under pressure."

"The examiner did not set a clear path for us, I suspect that... this test might not have a typical finish line," admitted Ling Lan. Han Jijyun's intelligence allowed Ling Lan to speak freely without worry.

She could finally throw off her sheepskin of a child! Hanging out with such a talented child meant that her own talents would seem less freakish as well. Ling Lan was so happy she could cry — these six years of playing a kid hadn't been easy.

Han Jijyun turned thoughtful at Ling Lan's words. After a while, he responded, "Possibly, the test had already begun the moment we stepped onto the field."

"What do you mean?"

"Is this really a field?" Han Jijyun's words jolted Ling Lan into awareness. She thought

back to when she first entered the field — that entrance had not at all been like a regular entrance to a field.

"Wait and watch," said Ling Lan and Han Jijyun in almost perfect unison as their eyes met. Since they had already been caught up in the illusion, all they could do was continue and take things as they came.

After that, they had only run a little bit further when it started raining cats and dogs. Ling Lan's party of ten were quickly soaked to the bone, and the rain obscured their vision while turning the earth beneath their feet into mud. The clothes on their body became heavy with rainwater and clung to their bodies, dragging them down. Under these conditions, having run for several thousand metres, lethargy started settling in. The two girls were hit especially hard and had already started to pant.

"This is real water, not an illusion," Ling Lan concluded after paying close attention to the signals her body were sending her. It looked like the setting of this test was using a combination of illusions and real props. There was no doubt that in this space they were occupying, there were sprinklers equipped all over the ceiling overhead...

Since they already knew that they were walking within a virtual environment within a room, Ling Lan decided to ignore what she could see as she tried to construct an image of the underlying room in her mind.

Admittedly, the virtual field presented to everyone had been nicely done — the racetrack of a field was just a large circular circuit, so even if those caught within the illusion ran multiple laps around the track, they would still never suspect that they were merely within an enclosed room.

Ling Lan's group ran another few thousand metres — although it felt like they had run countless circles around the track, not a single examiner came to inform them about how many laps they had left. This seemingly endless test began to cause the hearts of some of the weaker children to waver. In particular, the two girls' speed had dropped considerably, and they had fallen behind till they were at the very tail end of the group.

The two boys who were related to the girls, Luo Lang and Han Jijyun, merely turned a blind eye to this, however, continuing to run forward at a steady pace.

Seeing this, Ling Lan frowned. Shouldn't they try to help the girls?

Han Jijyun seemed to notice Ling Lan's hesitation, and quickly explained, "To become

a proper soldier, one has to rely on one's own strength. Helping her would be harming her instead. On the battlefield, you can't rely on others to survive."

Han Jijyun's words made a lot of sense, and Ling Lan was not a saint who would insist on helping. She was just about to ignore the girls when a thought flashed through her mind, causing her to pause in consideration.

Was this truly just a test of stamina and speed? If that was the case, the objective could just as easily be achieved on a regular field — was it really necessary to use such precious illusion technology to create this virtual environment? Furthermore, why split them into so many groups?

She recalled the marathons she had seen in her previous life, where tens of thousands of people could run together at the same time. Ling Lan had taken note of the width of the race track — it was about 50 metres wide. Even if not everyone could run at the same time, the track could still easily handle up to several hundreds or thousands of people. Wouldn't doing so speed up the testing process and save time?

Perhaps, the test was meant to test something else as well — what was the true intention of the test? Ling Lan knew that the answer to this question was probably the key to this test. If she could figure it out, then she would know how to pass the test.

What other hints had there been in the examiner's speech? Sensing Ling Lan's thoughts, Little Four helpfully provided a replay of what the examiner had said.

Tsk, only revealing what he wanted you to know, while keeping everything else a mystery — as expected of special examiners handpicked from the military forces...

Wait a minute. Handpicked from the military forces? Military forces? Realisation sparked in Ling Lan's mind — she got it! Since all their examiners were from the military forces, was this in itself a hint? Moreover, a group of ten men was precisely the smallest possible military unit in the military forces!

Chapter 28

The Data of the Ten Children

Ling Lan reigned in her elation, turning to ask Han Jijyun quietly, "What are the requirements to be a qualified soldier?"

Han Jijyun was very surprised by Ling Lan's random question, but still answered seriously, "Passion and loyalty in service of our beloved Chinese Federation, and to respect, trust, and care for our fellow warriors with a pure heart..." Han Jijyun recited the oath all soldiers had to swear under the flag of their country when they qualified to become a soldier and put on their uniforms; the oath already included all the qualities required of a soldier.

As she listened to Han Jijyun's recitation, Ling Lan's eyes grew brighter and brighter. She then continued asking, "And what are scout academies?"

"Nurseries for future soldiers," said Han Jijyun without any hesitation or doubt.

The smile on Ling Lan's lips became even more noticeable. "Then, we shouldn't lose our pure hearts to respect, trust, and care for our fellow warriors."

Han Jijyun abruptly came to a realisation, and his eyes brightened up. He finally understood what Ling Lan was hinting at.

"Qi Long, Luo Lang, go help Han Xuya and Luo Chao," shouted Han Jijyun to the two running at the front.

"Ah...!" Qi Long almost tripped over his own feet in surprise. Why did they have to help those two girls who were holding them back?

"I'll explain once the test is over." Although Han Jijyun agreed with Ling Lan's assessment, he didn't want to waste time arguing and so decided not to give Qi Long and Luo Lang an explanation right now.

Naturally, Qi Long listened to Han Jijyun. He gradually lowered his speed, dropping from first place to the last. Seeing this, Luo Lang hesitated for just a moment before

following suit. Remember, one of the two girls who needed help was his own biological sister — in contrast, Qi Long had no direct relation to either girl.

Also, while it was true that Luo Lang wanted to beat Qi Long once, he didn't want to win in this way. The prideful Luo Lang wouldn't accept this sort of shameful victory.

Undeniably, Qi Long and Luo Lang had the best physical fitness among the ten children. (Ling Lan didn't count due to her being touched by the gods.) Even though they each took on the burden of another person, their speed was not reduced by much. In no time at all, the two of them had barrelled forward again, once more taking up their positions at the front of the group.

In a particular observation room, the officer who just happened to switch his screen to view room 72 let out a surprised shout. Each officer in the room was in charge of monitoring ten rooms. The officers would switch their individual screens between rooms every one minute, going through all ten rooms in ten-minute intervals, and this officer had just happened to start viewing the feed from room number 72.

The officer seated right beside him had been focused on his own screen, but couldn't help looking up in surprise at his colleagues' shout. He took a glance at his friend's screen out of curiosity, and when he saw what was happening, he also started to exclaim, "Oh, how interesting!"

Their cries attracted the attention of the superintendent, who walked over with a frigid expression on his face. "What's going on? Why did you both break the command to maintain silence?"

"Sir! We've noticed some promising recruits," hurriedly reported the two officers, saluting the superintendent. There was no chagrin at all in their voices, instead, their tone was matter-of-fact. They knew that they were in the right because there was an overriding command in the military — the discovery of any promising recruits was to be reported immediately... and that was precisely what they were doing now.

Upon hearing this, the superintendent's expression thawed. He looked at the screen, and with just one glance, his demeanour changed. What he saw on the screen had truly shocked him.

The two officers glanced at each other feeling proud of themselves, but also relieved

that the children were still performing brilliantly at this bloody important moment.

Sadly, the screen wasn't cooperative; the superintendent had only observed for a few seconds when the feed switched over to that of another room.

"Wu, switch the feedback to the previous room," ordered the superintendent.

"Yes, Sir!" Officer Wu was the one who was in charge of monitoring Ling Lan's group. He quickly adjusted the feed so that the screen was fixed on the room Ling Lan's group was in.

From the screen, they could see that the two girls, Han Xuya and Luo Chao, who were originally being dragged around by Qi Long and Luo Lang's brutal pace, had now been piggybacked by the two boys. From the looks of it, the two girls had completely depleted their energy and could no longer run on their own.

Meanwhile, behind them, the six remaining children, including Ling Lan, had started running in a rotation, making sure to assist the two children with the weakest stamina. Of course, they also helped each other, giving each other a push or a supporting shoulder when necessary as they ran, so nobody had been left behind.

This current situation was a direct result of Ling Lan and Han Jijyun's decisive actions. If they hadn't reached out first to help the weakest two of their teammates, there would have probably been a few less people in the group by now.

Their actions had sparked some realisation in the other teammates, whom they didn't know as well, so when those teammates saw that they were growing tired, they had actually stepped up and offered to take over and help. Thus, the current situation came to be as seen on the screen.

"Give me the data of these ten children." Even as he marvelled at the sight, the superintendent's brows furrowed. A seed of doubt grew in his heart. This team was altogether too coordinated, causing him to suspect that someone may have abused their authority to manipulate things so that these children had been put into one group on purpose.

Soon enough, the data of Ling Lan's group of ten had been retrieved.

Ling Lan: Son of Major General Ling Xiao, god-class operator of the IN mecha <Belief>, vice commander of the Seventh Division of the Interstellar Forces. Inheritor of said major general's premium military benefits. Physical Fitness: [S] rank, Spiritual Power: Tier-2, Potential: [S] rank.

Qi Long: Son of Colonel Qi Yaoyang, ace pilot of the MT mecha <Optimus>, lead pilot of the Third Division of the Interstellar Forces. Physical Fitness: [S] rank, Spiritual Power: Tier-2, Potential: [S] rank.

Luo Lang: Son of Colonel Luo Qifeng, commander of the Third Fleet in the Ninth Division of the Interstellar Forces. Physical Fitness: [S] rank, Spiritual Power: Tier-2, Potential: [S] rank.

Han Jijyun: Son of Colonel Han Rong, deputy director of the Federal Central Military Intelligence Agency. Physical Fitness: [A+] rank, Spiritual Power: Tier-3, Potential: [S] rank.

Luo Chao: Daughter of Colonel Luo Qifeng, commander of the Third Fleet in the Ninth Division of the Interstellar Forces. Physical Fitness: [B] rank, Spiritual Power: Tier-2, Potential: [A] rank.

Han Xuya: Daughter of Major Han Yushao, acting head of the Federal Logistics Base on the Planet of Qiyuan. Physical Fitness: [B] rank, Spiritual Power: Tier-2, Potential: [A] rank.

Luo Shaoyun: Commoner. Nephew of Captain Luo Jiguang, commander of the Third Company of the mecha protective task force for mecha operators of the Thirteenth Division of the Interstellar Forces. Inheritor of said captain's premium military benefits. Physical Fitness: [A] rank, Spiritual Power: Tier-1, Potential: [A] rank.

Yuan Youyun: Descendant of the Yuan family of the Planet of Zhong Xing. Physical Fitness: [A] rank, Spiritual Power: Tier-1, Potential: [A] rank.

Li Jinghong: Descendant of the Li family of the Planet of Doha. Physical Fitness: [B] rank, Spiritual Power: Tier-1, Potential: [B+] rank.

He Chaoyang: Commoner. Adopted son of Captain He Shaoji, deputy captain of the Ninth Fleet Assault forces of the Seventeenth Division of the Interstellar Forces.

Inheritor of said captain's premium military benefits. Physical Fitness: [B] rank, Spiritual Power: Tier-1, Potential: [B+] rank.

Taking in this data, the superintendent could clearly see that all the children came from different star systems, and had backgrounds from all walks of life, though over half came from traditional military families. Most importantly, however, even the weakest potential among the children was at [B+] rank. Even if that ranking might not qualify for the special classes, it was more than enough to ensure a spot in the regular classes.

The superintendent looked once more at the first line. Ling Lan's data, in particular, made a surge of emotion rise up within him. The god-class operator of the IN mecha <Belief> Major General Ling Xiao... that man was the role model of countless soldiers... it was such a shame he had died in the death tunnel of a meteor field seven years ago. He could still remember what a shock it was when the news had first been received. The whole Federation had been shaken to its core, and all the military men had been greatly saddened by the tragedy.

For context, it should be noted that there were only 12 god-class IN mecha operators throughout the entire Federation. Each god-class operator was considered a national treasure, and was the representation of a country's might, acting as a deterrent to foreign enemies. And Major General Ling Xiao, in particular, had been the only operator to have ascended to god-class within the past ten years, and he had also been the youngest IN mecha operator.

Back then, everyone had been optimistic, anticipating that Major General Ling Xiao would be able to become the strongest god-class operator among the twelve, with youth as his greatest advantage. Sadly, the tree of his talent grew too high above the canopy ¹ — it was toppled by the wind long before he could truly spread out his branches.

Later on, the Federation's investigation had uncovered that the magnetic turbulence within the death tunnel was most likely a sinister plot hatched by an enemy nation, specifically targeting Major General Ling Xiao. Unfortunately, the Federal Intelligence Agency hadn't discovered this in time, and the painful price of their oversight was twofold — not only had the nation lost the potentially strongest god-class mecha operator of the future, but the two countries had also become bitter enemies, whereby

the war between them would not stop till one side was annihilated.

The death of a god-class mecha operator would never be forgiven by the soldiers of the Federation!

Chapter 29

The Final Lap

The superintendent suppressed his surging emotions, putting his full focus on the performance of the ten children on the screen. Finally, he smiled with satisfaction and said, "End their test and let them out."

The officer in charge of monitoring Ling Lan's group wavered, and asked, "Then how shall we score them?"

The superintendent glared. "Do you need me to teach you something so simple? How much time did they take to complete the course? And how is their condition now?"

The officer's eyes brightened. "Understood, Sir."

Meanwhile, on Ling Lan's end, the group of ten had been holding out for another few rounds. By now, even the indomitable Qi Long and Luo Lang were starting to tire. Running with another person on your back was worlds apart from running on your own — after just a few rounds, they had begun to feel the doubled strain on their bodies. Initially, they had thought that they would be able to persist for another ten to twenty rounds, but now they weren't so sure about that.

Among the ten children, Ling Lan was definitely the one in the best condition. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that she was never tired — because from the moment they had started running, Ling Lan had been circulating her Qi.

Ever since she had tasted its fruits in the strength test, Ling Lan had harboured suspicions that the Qi exercises still had secrets for her to uncover. So, she decided to apply it once again during the running test. Clearly, her decision was a wise one — after running for so long, she was still brimming with energy, and her vital stats remained at the same levels as when she was at rest.

These numbers were all supplied by Little Four. While Ling Lan was marvelling at her discovery, Little Four had shuffled over... To put it nicely, he wanted to help Ling Lan

research the Qi exercises and fulfil his role as a contracted assistant... but in truth, Little Four was just bored because he had no access to the internet here.

Still, with Little Four's help, Ling Lan very quickly understood the secrets of the Qi exercises. Apparently, circulating Qi could replenish the body's energy as it was being expended, as well as repair any damage affecting the body's functions, allowing the body to maintain peak condition over long periods of time.

Of course, Little Four also noted that the current situation, where her body was maintaining a stasis between expenditure and recovery, was only possible because Ling Lan was not using much energy right now. If Ling Lan were to carry someone and run, like Qi Long or Luo Lang, full equilibrium would probably be impossible — some energy would still be expended. That said, Little Four encouraged Ling Lan by adding that the amount of energy recovered by the Qi exercises would increase the more she trained and circulated her Qi, to the point that eventually, she may possibly never have to worry about her energy levels ever again. (Of course, this was only a possibility after several decades of training... but Little Four decided that Ling Lan didn't really need to know that.)

Ling Lan, who was still as sprightly as ever, looked at the sweat streaming from Qi Long and Luo Lang's foreheads as their steps started to slow. She could tell that their stamina was starting to fail, and that they might soon be unable to go on. Ling Lan was unsure whether she should offer to take over and help them — she wanted to, but she was also afraid that she would stand out too much by doing that. If only there was a way for her to help without being noticed...

Currently, under Little Four's regulation, Ling Lan's outward condition appeared to be similar to that of Han Jijyun's. Both of them were panting hard, and the backs of their shirts were drenched with sweat. After all, she had been helping the weakest boy in their group all this time — although she wasn't piggybacking the boy like Qi Long, carrying part of another's weight was still naturally more tiring than running solo.

A devil and an angel were fighting in Ling Lan's mind as she pondered this dilemma. But before one of them could overpower the other, the outside world had already made Ling Lan's decision for her.

Luo Lang cheered as he pointed towards one side, "I see a sign! One more lap left!"

Luo Lang's words were like a shot of adrenaline to the heart. Some of the children who

were on the brink of giving up rallied themselves for a final push.

Ling Lan looked towards where Luo Lang was pointing at, and saw an examiner lifting a display screen, which only had a number one written on it in Arabic numerals. This clearly indicated that they only had one more lap left to go.

Seeing this, Han Jijyun encouraged the group onwards, "Just one more lap left. We need to hold on no matter what. Make sure no one is left behind!"

"Okay!" all the other nine members of the group shouted in response, Ling Lan included. They would get through this final round no matter what.

Han Xuya suddenly inhaled sharply, and yelled, "Qi Long, put me down."

"What's wrong?" asked Qi Long in surprise.

"The last round. I can do it." It was impossible for Han Xuya not to have noticed Qi Long's fatigue, and she didn't want Qi Long's results to be affected because of her. Qi Long was meant for the Special A-class. For this final round, she would run on her own, even if she fainted before she could finish... she didn't want to burden Qi Long any longer.

On the other side, Luo Chao was also trying to convince Luo Lang to put her down for mostly the same reason. She didn't want her brother's results to be dragged down because of her. The two girls wanted Qi Long and Luo Lang to run at full speed for this final lap so that they could battle it out for the best time.

Han Jijyun stepped in to dissuade them, "It's already the final lap. If we don't all make it to the end, then what we've been doing so far will all be for nothing. Besides, you all should know what true soldiers do — they never leave a comrade behind!"

Han Jijyun's words were like a ray of light. Several of the quick-witted children had immediately figured out what he was saying. Han Xuya and Luo Chao, who had initially still wanted to protest, also changed their minds at Han Jijyun's words. Instead, Han Xuya urged, "Qi Long, pull me quickly, let's move faster." Since they had already decided to finish together, then they couldn't afford to waste even one more second.

And so, the strong pulled the weak in Ling Lan's group, and just like that, they supported each other as they hastened towards the finish line. At this time, Ling Lan took charge of pulling along the weakest two boys, leaving Han Jijyun free to run on

his own. Han Jijyun threw a grateful glance in her direction — Ling Lan's help was much appreciated. His stamina was almost completely gone; if he still had to pull along another person, he was uncertain if he could actually finish this final lap.

Outside the virtual environment testing room was an open-air café where more than a few of the examiners were seated, drinking tea and chatting with one another. This test was a long one which would last for at least three to four hours. Naturally, the examiners would not just sit outside the testing room and wait the whole time — most of them would typically order a cup of tea or coffee here to pass the time, and perhaps find a few familiar friends to chat with.

Similarly, the on-site examiner responsible for room 72 was talking to a few close friends. He was just getting comfortable when the communication device on his wrist started beeping.

He tapped the accept button on the device, and with a silver flash, a holographic screen appeared before him. Simultaneously, the image of the officer in charge of monitoring room 72 appeared on the screen.

"Notice, the testees in room 72 are about to complete the test. Please make the necessary preparations."

The examiner was bewildered. "Complete the test? In less than two hours? Really?" He really could not be blamed for his disbelief, for there had never been a record of this test being completed in less than two hours in all the history of the scout academy tests. The only exceptions were the children who had to be removed early from the room when they fainted out of exhaustion.

However, there was no such notification from his communication device, which was tracking the status of the ten children he was responsible for. None of the dots representing the ten children were red, which indicated unconsciousness, or even yellow, which meant their body had given out on them. All the dots were still green, indicating that they were all still conscious and that their bodies were still capable of going on.

The invigilator of room 72 observed the incredulous face of the on-site examiner, and couldn't help but laugh. He kindly reminded him, "You should hurry, otherwise you

won't make it in time. Also, the kids in that group are great kids. You won't be disappointed."

Without giving the examiner any chance to ask any further questions, the invigilator of room 72 ended the video call. He grinned to himself as he recalled the shocked face of the examiner — coming here to monitor these kids had not been so boring after all.

The examiner stared blankly at the dark screen before him, speechless. This blasted invigilator — couldn't he have explained more clearly?

The rest of the on-site examiners had also heard their conversation, all of whom were now looking at him in shock. Of course, there were also those who were burning with curiosity, and were just waiting to find out more so they could gossip.

"I've got it. Let me find out what's going on, then I'll come back and tell you guys. I need to go work now." Pensively, the examiner stood up, calmly grabbing his military cap from the table and putting it on before slowly ambling over to room 72.

Dammit, those children in there had better not disappoint him! The examiner tried to suppress his anticipation... ha, his previous calm had actually been completely faked.

Chapter 30

I Order You All To Attack Me!

The café was connected by just one tunnel to a pearly-white, awe-inspiring building of epic proportions right across from it. Its walls, which stretched on endlessly, appeared to be seamless, but they actually contained countless electronic doors hidden from the naked eye. The main door to this virtual reality construct was accessible from this tunnel, and it was open to the professional soldiers of the Federation for virtual simulation training and sparring.

On the other hand, the entrance Ling Lan and the other children had entered from was actually the backdoor of this virtual reality construct. It was connected to the scout academy and appeared to be just a regular field from the outside. This was also why Ling Lan had been so easily fooled — who'd have thought that a scout academy would have access to such advanced virtual technology? From this, one could see how much importance the Federation placed on cultivating talent among the young.

Of course, the convenient access bestowed upon the scout academy was not purely for testing purposes. In the future, the assistance of virtual technology would be invaluable in elevating all the stats of the children.

The examiner walked along the pearly-white wall for a distance. Frankly speaking, without using the signal he had pre-set with his communication device, the examiner himself wouldn't have a clue where room 72 was. Once these electronic doors merged into this endless wall, they could no longer be seen from the surface; as if they had become one with the wall.

The examiner was walking down yet another length of the wall when suddenly, the communication device on his wrist vibrated. He immediately stopped, a smile appearing on his face. It looked like he had found the room.

Almost randomly, he brushed his fingers over the section of wall right in front of where he stood, though it was really with focused intent. Soon enough, his fingertips told him that he had found the correct spot, and he pressed down lightly three times.

The wall reacted rapidly — the spot where the examiner had pressed lit up, and a

palm-sized screen emerged from the wall. The screen displayed a password page, with an input keyboard consisting only of the ten Arabic numerals, 0 to 9.

The examiner smiled as his fingers flew across the keyboard. His speed was astounding — his fingers moved so quickly that they appeared to leave blurry trails in the air. It was impossible for any observer to see which numbers he was pressing... and then there was a loud click, like the sound of a sealed door unlocking. Within the blink of an eye, a doorway had appeared to the left of the examiner.

The examiner strode in, and the door closed behind him, silently blending into the pearly-white wall once again.

The moment the examiner entered room 72, a wide virtual race track came into view. Behind him, neither the door nor the wall could be seen anymore — only a race track, which extended as far as the eye could see, remained. The illusion was so realistic that it was hard to believe that a door and a wall had existed right there just moments ago.

The examiner did not wait for long before ten figures appeared on the distant horizon. Some were running while some were pulled along, some were dragging down others down while some supported others... but still they staggered forward at a run — no, walk would be more accurate. It looked like the ten children were at the end of their ropes. In the past tests, the children would usually appear one at a time, unlike this group that still appeared organised and managed to arrive at the finish line without losing a single member.

The examiner found himself slightly impressed. Perhaps this was what the monitoring officer had been trying to tell him — they were truly great kids.

When the children saw him, they suddenly perked up and then, as if they had been injected with stimulants, they rapidly stormed towards the examiner like ferocious tigers.

The examiner smiled. The fact that the promise of victory could prompt such a reaction from these kids was a good sign — truly, they had potential. The examiner was very pleased, and his impression of Ling Lan's group improved yet again.

"I see the examiner..." The exhausted Qi Long caught sight of the examiner when he lifted his head and the welcome sight made him call out in exhilaration. Hearing his call, the other nine children rallied, eyes turning bloodshot, their appearances just like

rabid wolves...

Ah woooo! Eerily in sync, the ten children let out a ravenous howl and then, just as if they had seen a gourmet dish cross over into their territory, they abruptly exploded with energy, rushing toward the examiner standing in the distance.

They barrelled over the finish line but didn't slow down at all — instead, they actually sped up as they pounced on the waiting examiner.

The charge of the ten children was so aggressive that the examiner was taken aback, but who did they think he was? The examiner was a professional soldier who had lived through largescale galactic battles; he regained his composure within a split second.

"These little rascals!" Facing this sudden attack, the on-site examiner was rather speechless. With a stony expression, without even moving a single step, he slightly twisted his body to the side. And just like that, he completely evaded the children's desperate final attack.

"Darn it, we missed!" Qi Long stumbled face first into the ground and punched the ground in frustration.

Luo Lang, who was not far away from Qi Long, also slumped to the ground with a face full of dissatisfaction. The thing was, just as they were about to give up, Qi Long had suggested a plot that had boosted their waning energy...

What Qi Long said was that they must take revenge upon the examiner by turning him into a human cushion. That's right, they would push him to the ground and stack themselves on top of him. This would show the examiners that they were not to be easily bullied!

Alright, so this plot had fanned the festering hatred of the ten children to the max, actually managing to draw out unknown wells of energy from within them, which had allowed them to continue running all the way till the end.

Hatred truly was a formidable force.

As for Ling Lan, she hadn't cooperated mainly out of hatred. Instead, her mind had drifted to strange places — just thinking about a group of bratty kids pushing down a mature and handsome examiner... wasn't this just like some trashy group student-teacher romance? Wasn't it? Wasn't it?

Fine, so Ling Lan was a corrupted soul. It was all the fault of her previous life, during which she had read all sorts of lowbrow novels without shame.

The examiner stood watching them with his arms folded before him. With a cold smile, he said, "Oho, I see you still have energy left. Not bad." The frigid look on his face was like ice, but he was actually ecstatic inside. Hell, this group was just too much like those batches of new soldiers he trained — they had spirit, they had guts, and they could think for themselves. And yet they were only six years old... how extraordinary. The examiner felt the itch to just grab these ten children straight into his boot camp for special training — they were sure to become great soldiers someday.

Qi Long raised his arms in surrender. "Sir, we are fully beat."

The examiner scoffed, "If you all want to pass, get up." Dammit, still being able to speak in such a loud voice when you're out of energy? Who do you think you're trying to fool?

Qi Long tsked, but pried himself off the ground anyway. Everyone had worked so hard to complete this test, if they failed simply because they couldn't stand up at the end, how shameful would that be? Qi Long was deeply influenced by his father, who firmly believed that men should face death standing up.

Qi Long was the first to stand up, and Luo Lang was the second. Even though Luo Lang's hands and legs were cramping due to exhaustion, he still couldn't bear losing to Qi Long. Seeing Qi Long stand, he pushed his body to stand out of sheer unwillingness to lose.

Ling Lan was next, followed by Han Jijun, Luo Shaoyun, Li Jinghong, and He Chaoyang. They each stood up one by one, in sequence, until the final two, the girls Han Xuya and Luo Chao, were standing as well.

Although they stumbled and fell several times in the process, gracelessly, they all still managed to stand up straight in the end. In their eyes, all one could see was the stubborn persistence for success.

The examiner was pleased. "Not bad, you lot are certainly spirited. Now, I order you all to attack me."

All the children were stunned by this sudden turn of events.

Han Jijyun reacted the fastest. The CPU of his brain spun at high speeds, analysing the intent behind the examiner's words. His expression was serious and solemn as he asked, "Why?"

Chapter 31

The Weak Have No Right to Speak

"Why?" echoed the examiner with a cold smirk, "Do any of you have the right to ask?"

Han Jijyun was not flustered by the examiner's rebuttal. With his usual level-headedness, he said, "Isn't the test over? The examiner at the start had stated very clearly that once we reached the finish line, the speed and stamina test would be over. So we have the right to refuse your command."

Han Jijyun knew that everyone was already on their last legs — some were even having trouble standing, only staying upright out of sheer bullheadedness. Leaving aside attacking the examiner, they may not even be able to take even one more step.

The examiner looked at Han Jijyun, and there was a trace of approval in his eyes. This child was calm and analytical, not easily swayed by an opponent's show of force. In addition, he could defend his stance with evidence, displaying solid logical thinking, and was good at catching on to key points and discovering the logical flaws in other people's speech. Overall, a good candidate for a military strategist.

Still, no matter how much he admired Han Jijyun, he wouldn't change his mind. With a mocking smirk on his face, he said, "Brat, let me teach you all the first rule you need to know to survive in this world — the weak have no right to speak."

He swept a critical gaze over the angry children, and ten pairs of fierce and stubborn eyes stared right back at him. He was satisfied — if they hadn't been angered by his words, then their parents would have raised them in vain.

When the examiner's gaze swept over Ling Lan, he couldn't suppress a soft exclamation — Ling Lan's eyes were the calmest among the ten children, still like dead water, deep and unfathomable. Was he scared silly? Or had he seen through the ruse? Or perhaps he was just unmoved by all this? The examiner frowned, and watched Ling Lan thoughtfully for a beat or two.

What the examiner didn't know was that his gaze filled with killing aura was completely ineffective against Ling Lan. Remember, Ling Lan had grown up under the

crushing pressure of Number One's presence. In contrast, this kind of superficial scare tactic was really nothing to Ling Lan.

Reining in his curiosity towards Ling Lan, the examiner's face turned sly, and with an evil grin on his face, he said, "You all can choose to ignore my command. However, your results for the speed and stamina test... well, sorry, you will all fail." His killing aura dissipated as he said this, as if it had never been there to begin with, but his words were cruel, casually threatening to destroy the children's dreams and ambitions.

These words caused the faces of all the children in Ling Lan's group to fall. They had come brimming with confidence to enrol in this top-ranked scout academy, not to return home with their tails between their legs.

"We have the right to submit a complaint." The expression on Han Jijyun's youthful face was frigid; he was indeed an extremely intelligent child, but no matter how smart he was, he was helpless against this sort of irrational bullshit. His chest felt choked with rage; this was the first time he had experienced the futile anger of the weak and downtrodden.

"No, no, no! Didn't you all read the examination rules? Any child who complains or protests will have their results thrown out for this year — Could it be that you all would like to wait and try again next year?" The examiner laughed as he shook his head, strolling over to stop in front of Han Jijyun, where he then bent over slightly to look the boy in the face with mocking playfulness. With deliberate slowness, he bit out a word at a time, "Smart little repeat student!"

This expression, these words, and this sort of dismissive look — it was all just too infuriating. Damn, this examiner was just asking to be beaten up.

Asking to be beaten up? Ling Lan sweat-dropped, and immediately yelled out in her mind, *"Little Four, are you messing with my thoughts again?"*

Little Four slunk out from a corner, face scrunched up in an unhappy pout. His usually round face now looked like a steamed dumpling as he spoke through pursed lips, *"He's too despicable! Bullying children!"*

Alright, so Ling Lan wasn't even angry yet, but the mentally immature Little Four had already been riled up by the examiner on her behalf. *"Lord, beat him up for me."*

Ling Lan quirked her lips in a slight smile. *"What's in it for me?"*

Little Four was slack-jawed. He had not expected Ling Lan to ask for something in return for his request. Didn't she know that he was requesting this for her sake?

"Why?" Little Four wailed. Wasn't his host angry as well?

"You said it — you want me to beat him up 'for you'. Since I would be helping you, of course you should give me something in return." Ling Lan's self-satisfied smirk made Little Four think to himself that she was no better than the examiner, a big bully who bullied children.

"But he's bullying you! Don't you feel angry?" Little Four couldn't understand — the examiner was being so mean that even he felt indignant... why was Ling Lan so calm?

"Bullying me? I don't feel it." Although Ling Lan didn't know why the examiner was being such a hard-ass, still, she could sense no ill intentions from him.

Ling Lan was extremely grateful for all the pressure that Instructor Number One and Number Nine had exerted upon her all these years. They had given her an ability that wasn't really an ability — being able to sense when someone had evil or killing intent towards her. Of course, according to Instructor Number One, this ability of Ling Lan was still only at the rudimentary level, not really applicable and actually quite useless. If she ever encountered any true experts or assassins, Ling Lan would be dead before she could sense anything.

Ling Lan's words made Little Four want to tear his hair out — his host was just too insensitive; the examiner's bullying was already so obvious, like a slap in the face, and she could still say she didn't feel it?

Ling Lan was just about to reassure Little Four when her expression abruptly changed — she sensed something off in Qi Long's aura; his spiritual power was fluctuating wildly.

"Help me think of a way to pass Instructor Number One's exam three days later!" Ling Lan threw out her request, and without giving Little Four any chance to protest, she retreated from her mind-space. There was something wrong with Qi Long and she needed to keep her attention on him.

At this point, Ling Lan's nerves were taut, on full alert as she leaned slightly forward with both arms held low and slightly bent, one up and one down in a vague cross. Her right leg was shifted back, with her weight resting fully on her heel — this was a basic

combat stance that she had learned this year from Number Nine. It was the best neutral resting stance for attacking or defending, allowing the body to move and expend energy with ease.

Suddenly, Qi Long lifted his bowed head and everyone could see his bloodshot eyes, filled with killing intent. However, this killing intent was directed only at the examiner — it looked like the examiner's taunting of Han Jijyun had thoroughly angered Qi Long, and he was ready to explode.

The examiner sensed Qi Long's killing intent and leapt backwards with some surprise in his eyes. But by the time he landed, his entire demeanour and stance had changed, and all his eyes held was the anticipation for a fight.

Hollering loudly, Qi Long shot forward like a torpedo, swinging his tightly clenched fists at the examiner. There was a loud crash and then dirt went flying, blocking everyone's vision.

Could it be that Qi Long had actually hit the examiner? Did he throw the examiner to the ground? The other children couldn't see anything clearly and could only look at one another helplessly.

Only Ling Lan had a solemn expression on her face, her brows slightly raised. Though the others couldn't see what had happened due to the dust, Ling Lan had seen everything. Little Four had displayed everything that had occurred between Qi Long and the examiner in her mind, bypassing the problem of the dirt and dust entirely.

Chapter 32

Ling Lan Makes a Move!

Qi Long's punch had missed — the examiner had evaded Qi Long's blow with a tilt of his body, causing it to strike the ground, sending dirt flying into the air.

Even so, the gouge left on the ground from Qi Long's strike, roughly 3 inches deep and 1 metre wide, revealed that the power behind it was definitely no less than the 500 catties Ling Lan had lifted during the previous test.

It was impressive that Qi Long could achieve 500 catties worth of strength with just his own power; this was obviously a purer and more direct reflection of strength as opposed to Ling Lan's performance due to the circulation of Qi.

A flash of pleasant surprise passed through the examiner's eyes — perhaps even he hadn't expected that Qi Long would have such great strength. Even though this level of strength was nothing to the examiner, it had to be noted that Qi Long was still only six years old. There was no question that once Qi Long grew up, his strength would further grow to become even more impressive.

Qi Long didn't stop attacking just because his first attempt struck air. As the others watched, he once again leapt into the air and pounced at the examiner.

Unfortunately, despite all his speed and strength, Qi Long's attacks were full of holes due to his undeveloped combat skills. As such, the examiner was under no pressure whatsoever — if Qi Long were an enemy on the battlefield, the examiner could have killed him with one strike.

As the dust and dirt drifting through the air finally dissipated, the group could finally see the battle between Qi Long and the examiner. They looked on as the examiner blocked all of Qi Long's attacks using just a single hand.

Luo Lang lowered his voice and said to Ling Lan, "I'll go and help Qi Long. We'll count on you to hit the examiner." With that said, he jumped into the fray without waiting for a reply from Ling Lan, using all his might to send a punch flying towards the examiner's face.

Luo Lang's attack forced the examiner to bring out his other arm, and his previously stationary body also begun to move. For a while, the three fought to a stalemate.

Although Luo Lang had spoken very softly, all the surrounding children had still heard what he said. All of a sudden, the trembling in their bodies diminished as they all turned toward Ling Lan with expectation in their eyes, hoping that she could do as Luo Lang said and hit the examiner.

Fine, so the examiner's taunts had thoroughly roused the children's hatred, drawing it onto himself — and the level of this hatred wasn't low, which was why they collectively wished for him to get hit several times so they could vent their anger.

Thanks to Qi Long's attack, Han Jijyun had regained his usual composure, and he now noticed that Ling Lan was the only one among them that was standing steadily. Although his stance was a little strange, it was oddly pleasing to the eye, making one feel that it was natural to stand that way. Though Han Jijyun didn't know what that stance was, he could still tell that it was definitely some sort of amazing combat art.

The children's expectant gazes made Ling Lan feel the pressure even more keenly, as if it was pressing down upon her like a mountain. She couldn't take their heated gazes and so turned to face the spot where the three combatants were — her face twitched minutely as she thought sullenly to herself, why did they all think she could hit the examiner? Could it be that they all knew that she had a learning space in her mind?

Of course Ling Lan knew that this was impossible. These kids had entrusted their hopes to her solely because she was the only one among them who could still move. Naturally, if she could really hit the examiner then that would be the best, but even if she failed... well alright, they didn't really have high hopes to begin with anyway. This whole attempt was just a shot in the dark; to succeed, they would really have to have the devil's own luck.

On the other end, the examiner had figured Luo Lang out after fighting him for some time. Although his strength wasn't as much as Qi Long's, it was still decent, probably around 100 catties. However, his physical fitness was clearly worse — fighting up till now, Qi Long's attacks only became fiercer and fiercer, while Luo Lang's breathing was showing signs of becoming irregular just after several attacks.

Still, the examiner also knew that Qi Long's current condition was rare — he had pushed past his limits to bring out his latent reserves of energy. In all these years, the

examiner had never seen a child who could break past his own limits without outside stimulation from agents — it had to be said that Qi Long was truly talented.

Suddenly, he felt a chill seep out from his bones... his battle experience warned him of danger and without even having to think, his body jerked to a stop on the balls of his feet, and he used the energy generated from his momentum to change directions and leapt back two steps...

But it was too late! Before his eyes, a small, delicate white fist appeared, on the verge of hitting his face in the next second.

In the end, the examiner was still the examiner — he crossed his arms within this split second, successfully blocking this seemingly sweet and harmless little fist, which was actually filled with killing intent.

The two made contact with a resounding clap, and the examiner felt a huge wave of energy surge towards him. His body, which had yet to find stable footing, was once again forced to take a few steps back.

Meanwhile, borrowing the energy from the rebound, Ling Lan somersaulted through the air and landed securely between Qi Long and Luo Lang. She was still holding that odd basic combat stance, ready to launch her next attack.

The examiner's demeanour turned serious, all traces of his earlier playfulness gone. He looked at Ling Lan standing there in the middle, and he could actually feel cold sweat breaking out along his back. Who'd have thought that such a skilled fellow was hiding among this bunch of kids? He even knew how to hide his killing intent until the final second before revealing his fangs.

If it weren't for the fact that he had spent many years on the battlefield, gaining much experience and honing his reflexes, he would have certainly been hit by that last move. And although he wouldn't have taken much damage from it, losing face would have been unavoidable.

He cursed silently. Where did such a freakish talent come from? The boy looked so soft and fragile on the outside, with his delicate face and clueless expression — no matter how you looked, he simply looked like a cute, naïve, and innocent little boy who couldn't hurt a fly. And yes, although he had felt that there was something strange about the boy from the start, Qi Long's sudden attack and subsequent performance

had grabbed all his attention, leaving the boy to fade into the background.

He would never have thought that this kind of unassuming child would almost make him crash and burn.

Ling Lan's unexpectedly strong display thrilled the surprised children. They would never have guessed that Ling Lan would be able to push the examiner back several steps with just one punch — could it be that their hopes would really be realised?

Han Xuya was an outgoing and passionate girl — her emotions ran high upon seeing the current situation, driving away her fatigue and making her shout out loudly, "Ling Lan, beat him! Beat him!"

On the other hand, Luo Chao was a shy and reserved girl. She merely smiled bashfully in surprise, eyes shining with just a touch of admiration as she stared at that skinny figure standing beside her brother. Although he wasn't as well-built as her brother and the other boy, in her eyes, he was no lesser than them and was in fact even more reliable.

Ling Lan didn't know that she had unknowingly caught the budding heart of a pure young girl, romantic feelings twining around her in mistaken adoration — oh, what a mess!

In the invigilation room, the invigilator responsible for room 72 switched his feed to Ling Lan's room once again out of boredom. Immediately, what he saw was a clear stand-off between the invigilator and the kids, and the atmosphere didn't seem friendly. Aghast, he thought to himself, what the hell was going on?

His curiosity piqued, he fixed his screen once again on room 72, leaving only a small window at a lower corner of the screen to rotate through the other nine rooms he was monitoring.

Ling Lan signalled with her eyes for Qi Long and Luo Lang to start their attack. She knew that if she was the one to lead the charge, they would definitely not be able to handle the examiner.

Although Ling Lan had learned basic combat skills from Number Nine and had also sparred constantly with Number Nine, it was all just mental practice in the end. There was still a significant difference when it came to real battles in the physical realm.

During her last attack, Ling Lan had already noticed that her physical body couldn't keep up with her intentions — the examiner would never have had the chance to dodge her attack otherwise.

Chapter 33

Savage Little Wolf Cubs!

Qi Long and Luo Lang, having received Ling Lan's signal, shared a quick glance before they sprung out to attack.

Qi Long's speed was just a tad faster than Luo Lang's — he got to the examiner first and threw out a furious fist.

This fist had both power and speed behind it, cleaving through the air with an audible sound. This caused the examiner's face to change, and he immediately raised his arm to block it.

And then a fiery sensation spread along his arm from the spot he had used to block — the brat's strength and speed had actually increased yet again... The examiner discovered that Qi Long was clearly the berserker type. Seeing the little fellow's impressive performance, the examiner was getting more and more excited.

Before the examiner could counterattack to push Qi Long back, Luo Lang's attack had arrived from his other side — a whipping kick.

Luo Lang knew that he wasn't very powerful and that his fists would be no threat to the examiner, so this time he chose to change his attack into a strong kick instead.

Luo Lang's decision was unquestionably correct. Seeing this aggressive kick, the examiner had to admit that he had miscalculated. Luo Lang, who he had initially considered as the weakest and relatively harmless, had also found a way to contribute effectively, forcing him to spare some attention to deal with the boy's attacks.

The examiner felt rather peevish. Why couldn't these kids act like regular six-year-olds and just come at him recklessly? Why did they have to be so smart and even think of changing tactics?

He had no choice but to reach out with his other hand in a grab, catching hold of Luo Lang's foot as it reached him. But just as he was about to throw Luo Lang away from him...

Oh no!

The examiner sensed the danger approaching him from below and quickly let go of Luo Lang's ankle to retreat.

He moved just in the nick of time as Ling Lan's attack brushed past where he was moments earlier — a crotch kick! Without his noticing, Ling Lan had positioned herself below him where she had then crouched, both hands flat on the ground, and launched her right leg directly upwards.

In that direction... was the place that men were most afraid of being injured.

The examiner, fortunately, noticed in time, managing to dodge Ling Lan's terrifying attack by a hair's breadth.

Damn, that was savage!

As the examiner landed, a shudder passed through his heart as his crotch tightened reflexively. Ling Lan straightened up, face cool and expressionless, as his gaze swept across the examiner's lower half with some trace of regret for the near-miss. Seeing this, the examiner couldn't help but retreat another three steps, putting some distance between him and Ling Lan's group, before he felt a little safer.

The examiner couldn't help but be afraid — just look at the power behind that kick! If that kick had landed as intended, his family line would most certainly have ended with him. The examiner was beginning to regret his whimsy — why did he have to be so goddamn curious? Overly excited at the promise of great talent, he had decided to tease these kids just a little, but he hadn't expected to end up kicking a steel plate.

These were not the adorable children they appeared to be — they were actually savage little wolf cubs in sheep's clothing! The examiner could almost cry!

But still — he liked them!

The examiner looked at the three children before him, each with varying expressions on their faces. Regardless if they were wild (Qi Long), angry (Luo Lang), or cool (Ling Lan), their expressions couldn't hide the sheer tenacity in their bones as well as their savage natures. The smile at the corner of his lips deepened. Any soldier would be overjoyed in the face of such promising young talent.

"Haha, examiner 072 is in deep shit," the invigilator couldn't help but jeer as he watched the proceedings up to this point. He hadn't missed how flustered the examiner had been in that last encounter.

The superintendent, who was just passing by on his rounds, overheard him speaking and looked over. When he saw that it was that officer who reported room 072 earlier, his irritation faded — after all, it was because of that officer that he had managed to learn about Major General Ling Xiao's inheritor. So he merely gently chided, "Quiet, what are you making noise about now?"

The invigilator looked up to see the superintendent and stood up grinning to salute him, and then he reported in a low voice, "Sir, please look at this, there is a little problem." He pointed at the screen, asking the superintendent to come closer and see.

The superintendent glanced at him doubtfully, but still bent over slightly to look at the screen. On it, he saw the three children attack almost simultaneously – one from above, one from below, while the last one exploited any openings – and although their actions were still obviously untrained, they were surprisingly coordinated, causing the examiner quite a bit of trouble.

"That's strange. What is examiner 072 doing? He should just take them down." The superintendent couldn't understand — he just subconsciously assumed that that would be an easy thing for the examiner to do against two or three little brats.

"Sir, take a closer look at this child's movements." The invigilator had watched for a longer time and so had sussed out part of the problem.

The superintendent knew that the invigilator wouldn't mention something for no reason, and so continued to peer at the screen intently.

In room 072, Ling Lan was finding it easier and easier to move as the fight progressed. Initially, there was still some disconnection between her body and her intent — a few times, she was already there in her mind, but her body was a beat slower, making her miss out on several opportunities to hit the examiner. During this prolonged fight, however, she could feel her body becoming more agile, starting to flow and work in tandem with her intent.

As Ling Lan got into her groove, the examiner naturally found it more and more troublesome to fight. At the start, he still had some room to slack off, but gradually, he found that he could no longer hold back. If he didn't put his full attention on handling Ling Lan's group's attacks, he was very likely to get hit by Ling Lan.

After fighting for so long, the examiner had also come to understand the children's strategy. They wanted to overwhelm his guard and find an opening, just to leave a mark on his body with either their fists or their feet. What a bunch of vengeful brats... the examiner thought to himself helplessly. He'd never have thought that a simple joke would cause the children to become so dead set on hitting him.

The examiner could only keep warding them off — he couldn't really hurt them after all, could he? Even if the military didn't sanction him for it, he would also be unwilling to do so. I mean, just look! These three kids before him had such great potential.

The examiner was not at all anxious. He had all the patience in the world to wait them out. A veteran soldier would never lack for patience, otherwise, they would never have survived the battlefield. These kids were already on their last legs to begin with — he believed that it wouldn't take long for them to run out of energy completely. At that time, they wouldn't be able to do anything even if they had more tricks up their sleeve.

Sure enough, just as the examiner predicted, the children couldn't fight on for much longer. Luo Lang was the first to run out of energy and was grabbed by the examiner, and thrown back into the middle of the other students where he remained slump, unmoving. Of course, the examiner did this skilfully so that Luo Lang's body wasn't injured in the process — he was only immobile due to fatigue.

And so only Ling Lan and Qi Long were left to fight against the examiner. Without Luo Lang's cover, Ling Lan's sneak attacks could no longer work, so Ling Lan decided that she might as well pull out all the basic combat moves she had learned in her mind-space and fight directly.

Ling Lan didn't forget what Number One said — what you learned must be applied, and it was even better if you could apply it in a real battle... Although fighting with the examiner was not really a real battle, it was still a chance for her to apply what she had learned in a combat setting, so of course Ling Lan wouldn't let the chance pass her by.

Besides, after fighting for so long, Ling Lan understood that the examiner would never hurt them, which meant that she could go all out without fear. Since the examiner was

only going to be on the defensive, if she didn't take the chance to practice all her moves now, then when should she do it?

As Ling Lan's moves grew bolder, Qi Long's moves also became increasingly aggressive. Qi Long was a quirky child — he didn't like to think very much, being of a bold and brash character, but this didn't stop him from being strong. He instinctively chose the method best suited for himself, so when Ling Lan's attacks grew fiercer, he felt it was right and so followed suit.

The two fought ferociously to the point where the examiner was actually disadvantaged, where he looked like he was only able to focus on blocking.

The observing children on the side all cheered on Qi Long and Ling Lan, with the exception of Han Jijyun and the recuperating Luo Lang. The two boys had serious looks on their faces — they didn't think that Qi Long and Ling Lan's current style of attack would be of any use against the examiner.

Chapter 34

A Sure Hit!

Sure enough, after a flurry of rapid attacks Qi Long was the first to slow down, as the explosion of energy brought on by his berserk state came close to ending. His aura began to fluctuate unsteadily, and his breathing became laboured.

Ling Lan knew that Qi Long was likely at the end of his rope. If Qi Long dropped out, she would not be able to hold up against the battle-experienced examiner on her own, much less look for a chance to hit the examiner.

Ling Lan's brows furrowed as she considered her options. Deep down, she was actually rather annoyed — if she had known that she would have to fight in this random battle, she would have brought some weapons with her, such as some type of hidden weapon. Even if she could not hit the examiner with them, they would still have served as a good distraction.

Unfortunately, all she had on her were some consumable energy fluids to replenish physical energy, which she had brought as supplies for the exam. She only had three tubes, so even if she wanted to use them like hidden weapons, they wouldn't be very effective. She might have been able to fool the examiner for a while with a great number of items to throw, but with just these two or three things, the examiner would never fall for it.

What should she do? Let Qi Long eat one of the tubes to replenish his energy?

An idea sparked in Ling Lan's mind, and she immediately hatched a plan. So, she started to match her speed to Qi Long's, slowing down as she made her aura waver as well, breathing hard, and sweating freely from her forehead. All outward signs broadcasted the fact that she was about to collapse any second now.

Ling Lan and Qi Long's obviously deteriorating condition put a damper on their comrades' cheers, which slowly weakened and finally faded away. Disappointment and resentment was visible on all their faces — it looked like their dream of landing a hit on the examiner would not be realised.

Han Jijyun and Luo Lang exchanged a look, and saw each other's bitter smiles. Honestly, this result was within their expectations, however, somehow, it just didn't sit right with them — they had really hoped that Qi Long and Ling Lan could have brought them a miracle.

Was there really no hope left?

At that moment, Qi Long traded yet another blow with the examiner. This time, due to a lack of energy, Qi Long was thrown backwards by the examiner's block, stumbling back several steps.

These few steps back sapped away Qi Long's confidence, and the strength that had supported him in the fight all this time seemed about to disperse. His stance started to falter, and he looked as if he was about to crash. Seeing this, Ling Lan rushed over to hold him up, and with a few light steps, she rapidly whisked him away from the examiner, putting some distance between them.

"Are you alright?" With her back to the examiner, Ling Lan asked Qi Long frantically as she gripped his hand.

Qi Long's expression jerked and his spirits rallied, as if Ling Lan's concern had given him confidence and courage once more. He said nothing, but nodded firmly to show that he was fine.

Ling Lan turned around to look at the examiner, and then said resolutely, "Then let us fight this one last time." The condition of the two clearly showed that they were incapable of fighting any longer than that.

Qi Long clenched his fists, gaze determined as he said, "Ok!" That said, he swiped his right hand over his face, as if he were wiping away sweat, but also as if he were wiping away his fatigue to boost his confidence. The fighting spirit in his eyes was ignited once again, and it seemed like it burned brighter than before.

Even if he knew he was about to lose, he would not back down. Because this was their final chance — it was make it or break it.

Qi Long and Ling Lan's performance pleased the examiner greatly. The care and concern for a teammate, the courage to fight till the end against a strong opponent — these were all qualities necessary to become an exceptional soldier, and these two kids had them. This was very rare; he was glad that he had been able to find such excellent

young talent.

Qi Long attacked first. Although his combination of punches still had speed and strength behind them, the examiner still managed to dodge them easily. There was no helping it — Qi Long only knew these few combat moves. After seeing them used repetitively, even if the examiner could not remember them, his body was already familiar enough with Qi Long's attacks that handling them was a breeze.

The examiner had just dodged Qi Long's attack when, on his other side, Ling Lan was already rushing in.

However, the examiner's attention had been on Ling Lan all this time, because, compared to Qi Long, Ling Lan was much harder to deal with. Although Ling Lan's combat moves were not that varied as well (she had only learned one basic set of combat skills), she was much smarter than Qi Long. She moved in unpredictable ways, and would modify her attacks according to the situation during battle. All this required the examiner to spend more thought when handling her.

The examiner saw Ling Lan's punch coming, and just like the attacks before it, it came from a spot that was the trickiest and most annoying to handle. These spots were basically defensive blind spots, very difficult to defend against — it was either dodge or substitute offense for defense, counterattacking the opponent to force them to retract their move.

Without having to think about it, the examiner pushed a palm out in return, aimed at Ling Lan's chest. His arm was longer and his palm was wider — even as a counterattack, he was certain that his attack would reach Ling Lan first. And in their earlier encounters, Ling Lan had always reacted as he had hoped and gave up on her attacks. After all, continuing on stubbornly when you knew that your attack would be fruitless would only get yourself hurt, while your enemy would remain unharmed. A smart person would never do such a stupid thing.

It was then that an accident occurred. Ling Lan didn't dodge but continued to press forward, and then, a figure appeared in the path of his palm hurtling towards Ling Lan — it was Qi Long!

Not good! The examiner was alarmed, but because everything happened so quickly, he could no longer stop his attack. He rushed to pull back the force in his arm as he felt his palm connect solidly with Qi Long's chest.

"AH!" screamed Qi Long, his entire body thrown into the air by the force of the blow. In mid-air, he threw up a mouthful of blood, and then crashed mercilessly onto the ground, where he then lay unmoving.

"Ah... Qi Long, he's hurt!" the observing children all yelled out in fright. Han Jijyun in particular had become petrified, his face white as a sheet.

The examiner was horrified. Had he pulled back too late? All his attention was now focused on Qi Long — looking at his prone body lying on the ground, fresh blood trickling out from the corners of his mouth in a steady stream.

How did this happen? Could it be that he really hadn't managed to pull back in time, and had struck Qi Long with full force? Had he injured his internal organs? The examiner's thoughts were a mess, with no mind to spare for other matters. All he could see was Qi Long's body on the ground, spewing blood.

"BAM!"

The loud sound of a strong fist hitting flesh rang out abruptly, and the examiner was sent flying by a large surge of energy, falling to the ground in a heap.

It turned out that Ling Lan had not given up on her attack. Taking advantage of the examiner's mental chaos, she had snuck in unnoticed to land a sure hit.

Ling Lan blew lightly on her 'weapons', her delicate fists, and grinned as she said, "Mission complete. Examiner hit. But sir, you wouldn't fail us just because you were embarrassed, right?"

Chapter 35

Test Completed!

Sprawled on the ground, the examiner's reaction was quick. With a back spring, he flipped back onto his feet.

Although Ling Lan's punch had seemed very powerful, powerful enough to send the examiner flying, it hadn't actually done much damage to the examiner, only leaving a dark bruise on the examiner's left cheek. Of course, this perfectly suited Ling Lan's intent — she had only wanted to prove that they were not so easily bullied.

The examiner stood there unmoving, but his face was an icy wasteland. Lifting his hand to touch the bruise on his face, even though it was numb to the touch, he felt an inexplicable hurt welling up from his heart.

Indeed, it was a hurt mixed with rage along with deep disappointment — he wasn't angry because Ling Lan had managed to hit him, but because, with that hit, Ling Lan had displayed a selfishness and ruthlessness that he could not condone.

The examiner could not fathom how this promising child, excellent on so many fronts, could be so cold and unfeeling to use his own companion as a human shield to achieve his ends. Although he had been flustered by the accident in the last encounter, his eyes had still seen clearly — Qi Long had suddenly appeared to block the hit meant for Ling Lan, not out of his own volition, but because Ling Lan had dragged Qi Long directly into the path of the examiner's attack.

Worse yet, Ling Lan seemed utterly unconcerned about the condition of his companion after the fact, only focused on his own results. This type of selfish behaviour was the last straw for the examiner — he decided that he would never give Ling Lan the chance to enter the special classes. The Federation could never give specialised cultivation to such a cold and unfeeling, selfish child. Even if he became a soldier, he would only bring harm to the Federation and to his fellow soldiers.

But before the examiner could start yelling, what happened next stunned the examiner into silence.

Ling Lan walked over to the unconscious Qi Long, who was still lying on the ground spewing blood, and kicked him several times on the side none too gently, saying with some consternation, "Alright. It's done. Aren't you going to get up now? Don't you think you're overdoing it?"

And just like that, Qi Long sat up, a silly grin on his face as he said, "You really hit him?" Blood continued to trickle out of the corners of his mouth as he spoke, gruesome to see.

Ling Lan said smugly, "Of course. Who do you think I am?" There were times when she just had to be childish — Ling Lan knew that she might already have overdone things a little, so all she could do was try and make up for it now.

Qi Long nodded repeatedly in open admiration as he said, "Yup, Ling Lan, you're definitely stronger than me." That said, he continued eagerly, "Didn't I act really well though?"

Ling Lan nodded easily without much sincerity, even going so far as to pat Qi Long on the head to humour him.

Alright, so Qi Long's current demeanour was just too much like those loyal dogs she was familiar with in her world 10000 years ago — that earnest begging look was just too adorable that she couldn't help but to reach out and pet him.

The straightforward Qi Long had no idea he was being patronised by Ling Lan, nor did he know that his image in Ling Lan's mind had been relegated to 'adorable' — He happily scrambled off the ground after being praised, licking at the dried bloodstains at the corners of his mouth. With some regret, he said, "Such a shame we had to waste so much energy fluid... this taste is awesome, I've never tasted such tasty energy fluid."

Ling Lan rolled her eyes internally at his words, thinking, of course it was delicious — that tomato-flavoured energy fluid was the result of her hard research, how could he compare it to other energy fluids? Thinking of the original taste of energy fluids, Ling Lan's body shuddered reflexively. That taste... was really not for human consumption. Probably even the cats and dogs of 10000 years ago would not touch it.

Ling Lan was not someone who would mistreat herself. Since she couldn't stomach the taste of it, she decided that she would change it herself. With the help of Little Four, they finally managed to develop energy fluids in several fruit and vegetable flavours,

and tomato was just one of those flavours.

She had given Qi Long that flavour because the colouring of that flavour also resembled that of tomatoes, a vibrant red, which would easily let others mistake it for blood, lending even more credibility to Qi Long's act of getting injured.

Looking at the lively and spirited Qi Long bouncing around, Han Jijyun's face finally returned to its usual colour. He asked with some confusion, "What did you all do exactly?" When he had thought that Qi Long was seriously injured, he had been too overwhelmed with panic to see what was going on.

Han Jijyun's question echoed the question the examiner had in his mind. Although he was still uncertain about the details, by now, he had figured out that he must have fallen into some trap set by the two brats before him. How unexpected that a battle-experienced soldier like him would fall prey to the schemes of two children.

He wasn't at all angry, however. Instead, joy was coursing through him. The child that he had found most promising, with such impressive abilities, was really not as terrible as he had thought...

Qi Long heard Han Jijyun's question and hurried to explain, "When I was thrown back by the examiner, Ling Lan came to drag me away. It was then that he gave me energy fluid, and when his back was to the examiner, he hinted at me to act, to pretend to be injured using the fluid."

Still grinning widely, Qi Long scratched the back of his head, sheepish at causing everyone to worry. "So, when the examiner hit me later on, I pretended to get hurt and faked being unconscious."

The examiner looked at Ling Lan pensively, then suddenly barked out, "Were you not afraid of making an error? What if I hadn't been able to pull back in time? Your plan could have easily caused Qi Long to get injured, even destroy his future."

Ling Lan looked puzzled. "Would you, Sir, have made a mistake like that?" Implied was her utmost trust in the examiner's ability to control himself.

Qi Long just continued to grin, face still full of trust. Thinking of something, Han Jijyun looked at Ling Lan with an obscure gaze, which contained some hint of admiration but also a trace of anger, but he very quickly returned to his usual stoicism.

Ling Lan's words made the examiner splutter, but he really couldn't refute what he had said. He found that he had no idea how to handle this brat before him, but he had to admit that Ling Lan wasn't wrong — he definitely wouldn't have made such a mistake. If it weren't for the fact that Qi Long's act had been too realistic, spewing blood and all, he would never have doubted himself. In the end, he was the one who had been lacking in self-confidence.

The examiner chuckled dryly. To think that Ling Lan had shown him his own weakness — what a remarkable child.

This boy was really too extraordinary — bold as brass, yet attentive to details, and vicious in a fight. Scarier still, he had charisma, being able to convince others to join him easily — Qi Long and previously Luo Lang, though both strong themselves, had put their trust in Ling Lan unequivocally, letting him decide everything.

And lastly, the boy had used strategy to expose the weakness in his heart... the boy had understood that he would never hurt them, so if someone got injured during the fight, he would certainly be disturbed, thus revealing an opening in his defence.

The examiner sighed and shook his head. Children these days were certainly not easy to fool. Rather huffily, he said, "This time, you all pass!"

The examiner's words caused all the children to jump up in happy excitement. This meant that they had qualified to become students at this scout academy! Of course, whether or not they could attend the special classes was still to be decided — that would depend on the final score given by the examiner. Once the scores of the four exams had been totalled up, the first hundred students would be taken into the special classes.

The examiner ignored the students celebrating before him, focusing instead on turning on his communication device to press the button marking the completion of the test.

Chapter 36

Becoming a Boss

The originally overcast sky cleared up in an instant as Ling Lan saw the surroundings blur around her. Once she could see clearly again, she found that she was now standing on a sandy plot of land while the original racetrack was nowhere in sight.

This sudden change shocked all the children, who could only stand there gaping in surprise.

Where they stood now was no longer the outdoor field they had been seeing; it was actually a 700-800 square-metre enclosed room. There was nothing in the room except a wide expanse of space covered in sand and dirt. Due to the simulation of rain in their test and their running all over the room, the ground was now a disgusting muddy mess.

Meanwhile, the roof above had numerous sprinklers equipped, packed tightly across the ceiling and spread out to every corner — they were most likely the source of ‘rain’ during the test.

In contrast to the children’s shock and surprise, Ling Lan and Han Jijyun merely shared a knowing glance and smiled. The changes to their environment proved that their hypothesis had been correct. They truly had been led unknowingly into a virtual environment training room.

The examiner didn't lead the children back through the door he had come from; instead, he brought them to the door they had entered from at the beginning. Opening it, he signalled for them to leave.

The moment Ling Lan stepped out of the door, she saw that familiar field where the children had sat down at the beginning, where they had first been gathered before being split up into groups.

Ling Lan understood now. She looked back to see the examiner standing on an empty racetrack, nodding at them in farewell. At this moment, his expression was no longer strict and foreboding, but instead contained some trace of humour. Finally, he turned

to leave, walking further and further away until he disappeared at the end of the racetrack.

Apparently, the virtual environment mode of these rooms had already been activated while they were outside. When the staff members had brought the different groups of children one by one to the track to prepare for their test, they were actually bringing them into separate rooms.

When the ten children appeared without warning out of the virtual racetrack, the surrounding staff members on the outside couldn't help but reveal shocked expressions. After all, it had only been less than 3 hours since the tests began, which was an hour earlier than the typical end time for this test — could it be that these children had all failed and were prematurely ejected from the testing room?

Just as they were wondering what to do, they noticed the digital number plates by the students' sides. All of them were lit up with the soft green light which indicated the successful completion of the test. The staff members excitedly smiled — didn't this mean that all these kids were amazing talents?

Fine, fine, so even the best Central Scout Academy had an insatiable thirst for promising talent.

The staff members helpfully led them out of the testing site. When Ling Lan walked out of the main gates, the first thing she saw was Ling Qin's anxious face and she immediately felt warmth bloom in her heart.

Yep, being with family was still the best! Only now did Ling Lan feel the aches and pains all over her body — although she had already held back her strength in the previous fight, the excessive exercise had still damaged her muscles, which were now making their protests known.

The parents and guardians of the other children were also there waiting. Seeing their children appear, they all gathered around, asking about the test. The outcome of this test would determine the future of the children as well as influence the future of their respective families.

Learning that they had all passed, the guardians were very happy. Meanwhile, the children themselves had also established a deep bond by going through the test together — they all promised to reunite on the first day of school before reluctantly

saying their goodbyes.

Ling Lan said goodbye individually to each of the nine children, her manner polite and reserved, no hint of impropriety in her actions. This greatly pleased Chamberlain Ling Qin who took pride in the fact that his young master was such a gentleman, as expected of Major General Ling Xiao's child.

Feeling that she had done everything as necessary, Ling Lan turned to leave with Ling Qin. But she had only taken two steps when she felt Ling Qin suddenly stiffen beside her before relaxing again. At the same time, there was a violent sound of rushing air behind her — an ambush?!

Ling Lan didn't sense any evil intent, however, so she simply moved one step to the left to evade this fierce tackle.

With a loud "Whump!" her attacker was splayed on the ground, face down in a spread eagle position right before Ling Lan's feet.

Seeing this very familiar figure, Ling Lan's eye twitched. She shouted, "Qi Long! What do you think you're doing?!"

Qi Long was now covered in dirt. He quickly climbed up, face calm as he brushed off the dirt from his clothes before saying, "I have come to say goodbye."

Hearing this, Ling Lan face-palmed internally. "Just now, didn't I already say goodbye to you?" Dammit, when did this brat learn how to talk nonsense? Was he just being contrary?

Despite having his lie exposed by Ling Lan, Qi Long wasn't at all embarrassed. With no trace of shame on his face, he continued, "That was just a group activity. Right now, this is my personal goodbye."

Qi Long lifted his head to smile winningly at her. "Hehe, Ling Lan, aren't you touched?"

"Touched? Not at all. Shocked? Maybe a little," said Ling Lan drily, face expressionless. Qi Long was the type that would take a mile if you gave an inch — she couldn't afford to show him any favour whatsoever or else the situation would spiral out of her control.

Qi Long chose to ignore Ling Lan's jab, instead looking intently at Ling Lan, as if trying

to confirm something. His gaze was sharp and penetrating, causing Ling Lan to shift uncomfortably, but before Ling Lan could say anything, Qi Long had said, "Ling Lan, you really are stronger than me. I submit to your strength. From now on, you're my boss."

Ling Lan blinked. Boss? What the hell? Had she heard wrongly, or had Qi Long gone mad? Also, did she look like she wanted underlings? Why would Qi Long bring this up?

Furthermore, why didn't anyone notify her of this? Was this decided privately just like that? Ling Lan's face was stuck in a deep frown as she thought all this to herself helplessly. Honestly, Ling Lan had never considered becoming a boss — bosses were always at the head of the pack, the primary target, the one who would get shot first. Becoming a boss would go against the resolution she had set from the start — to live a humble, low-profile, and safe life.

The moment Qi Long finished speaking, he waved goodbye and fled, leaving a trail of dust in his wake. Ling Lan never had the chance to say anything. However, for Qi Long, Ling Lan's opinion was irrelevant. Qi Long was a single-minded creature — as long as he himself had acknowledged it, even if Ling Lan was in denial, he was dead-set on Ling Lan being his boss.

And thus, Ling Lan became Qi Long's boss.

Ling Lan grimaced as she watched the gradually disappearing figure of Qi Long. She was a little annoyed at herself for being too slow to react. Back then, she should have firmly grabbed hold of Qi Long and communicated with him properly... of course, this method of communication did not exclude the use of violence to get her point across.

Han Jijyun ambled over with a slight smile on his face, clearly rejoicing in her misery.

Ling Lan complained to him, "Couldn't you have kept a better watch on that bro of yours?"

"Bro?" Han Jijyun was startled by the term, not understanding what Ling Lan meant.

Ling Lan smirked evilly. "Your bromance partner!"

Han Jijyun was clearly taken aback for a moment as he digested this new term. And then, as if coming to a realisation, his jade-white little face turned red. Looks like his skin was still a little too thin to take this sort of joke.

Ling Lan was surprised by Han Jijyun's blush — who knew that the mature-looking Han Jijyun would react in such a childish manner? "Wow, you're embarrassed just like that?"

Oh, Ling Lan, no matter how intelligent Han Jijyun was, he was still just an innocent six years old child — of course his skin couldn't be as thick as yours which had been collected over the course of two lives, a total of 30 odd years.

Out of intense embarrassment, Han Jijyun snapped back, "You're already going to be a boss, can't you be a bit more serious?"

Ling Lan was hit where it hurt. Internally weeping, she looked at the sky. "I heard nothing."

Dear God, she only wanted to live a peaceful life — she didn't have any grand ambitions; she only wanted any children who wanted to rely on her to stay far, far away, and to not disturb her. Amen!

But Han Jijyun's next words caused Ling Lan's fervent hopes to be dashed into pieces. "He's already called you boss, are you planning to reject him? Also, you should also take care of me in the future... Boss. Ling. Lan."

Hells. Looks like even Han Jijyun was claiming her as his boss.

Chapter 37

The Examiner's Recommendation!

At this time, Luo Lang stalked over with his head held high with his younger twin sister Luo Chao in tow. He rather looked like a peacock, thought Ling Lan to herself in amusement.

Luo Lang stared at Ling Lan for several seconds, and then said, "Since Qi Long has submitted to you, then I'll also acknowledge your strength... grudgingly. Please take care of my sister and me from now on."

Huh? What was this? Ling Lan stared back blankly — she didn't really have any connection to Luo Lang, right?

In her mind, Little Four could hold back no longer. Thunderously, he spat, *"What else could it be?! He also wants you to be his boss! You- you've wronged me."*

Little Four's gaze reflected only sorrow, creeping Ling Lan out. What was up with Little Four? Why did he sound so forlorn saying that she had wronged him?

Ling Lan's mind started racing, thinking about what she could have done to hurt Little Four's delicate soul... But after much thinking, she still couldn't figure it out and so could only assume that the little rascal's rebellious phase had come.

Little Four was very angry and full of animosity. He hated those shameless people who had come to wrap themselves around Ling Lan's sturdy thighs ¹. He was also mad at Ling Lan's actions — she must have shown off too much to garner so much attention, causing him to have so many competitors to become her number one underling.

Alright, so Little Four was no longer obsessed with the epic 'Three Kingdoms'; he was now addicted to some third-rate novels meant for leisure reading. (The sudden drop in taste was just too jarring.) Consequently, the way he addressed Ling Lan had also changed.

This was how it happened: One day, Little Four was extremely bored, so he decided to surf the net randomly. By chance, he stumbled onto a very obscure website, which was

called 'World of Slash'. You even needed a password to log in! This piqued the curiosity of Little Four... Naturally, passwords and the like were useless against him — he easily bypassed them and toured the site. He discovered countless business opportunities in there. So many people were crying out for slash novels, slash fanworks, slash videos... and they were willing to pay for them!

Little Four's greatest goal right now was to earn money — how could he let such a golden opportunity slip by? Although he wasn't certain his database had slash fanworks or slash videos, Little Four was confident that his database would at least have some slash novels. Putting aside the other things in his database, the sheer amount of novels he had in there was staggering.

When Little Four searched his database, sure enough, the novels tagged as slash were almost more than he could count. (This was all the fault of Ling Lan's indiscriminate selection of reading material in her past life.) Little Four was ecstatic! He could already envision the Square-Holed Brothers ² pouring in.

Little Four also found that the more words a novel had, the more money it was worth, so after some picking and choosing, he chose to publish the rather long 'Reincarnation in a Time of Armageddon: the Rise of the Cannon Fodder'. Of course, he was also very curious to see what these slash novels were about, to drive the people here so crazy.

Little Four read as he published and very soon, he found himself transfixed by the deep brotherly bond between the novel's boss and his underling. He then recalled what Ling Lan had said to him, about wanting him to be her younger brother... Little Four was immediately moved to tears. (Sweat, Little Four was still clueless about what slash truly meant at this point. He had only read up till around chapter 150 where the sexual tones were still very subtle, and so remained as innocent as before.)

However, Little Four's joy didn't last for long before competition appeared, and two at once at that! At this very moment, Little Four could fully understand the depressed mood of Little Ling in the novel — the more competition there was, the greater the pressure...

Should he treat his boss better in the future so that his number 1 position wouldn't be taken away? Little Four started to think hard about the issue, unaware that his internal core chip was starting to heat up unnaturally once again.

Let's leave aside Little Four wild imaginings and meaningless jealousy, as well as Ling

Lan's concerned amusement about it for now. After the examiner for room 072 escorted the children out, he immediately contacted the invigilation room.

In the invigilation room, the superintendent had been watching when the examiner hurt Qi Long by mistake and his brows had locked tight in a frown, and it only got tighter as he saw Ling Lan send the examiner flying. Only when Qi Long stood up at the end, apparently unharmed, did his brows relax.

Seeing the examiner's contact request, he accepted without waiting for the invigilating officer to do so. Not allowing any room for the other to speak, he bellowed, "Number 413, once we're done, report back to the training camp!"

The examiner for room 072 gaped. "Sir! Why are you there..."

Dammit. Why was his direct superior on the other side of the line? Why was he so unlucky?

With a long face, the examiner asked carefully, "Sir, then when should I come back?"

The superintendent huffed and said coldly, "A month later."

The superintendent's reply made the examiner want to curl up and cry. Heavens, a month in the training camp — even if it wouldn't kill him, he would still shed a layer of skin. He'd never have expected that he would have to go back to that terrifying place again after 5 years, to relive the painful and horrible time when he had been a recruit.

"What? You have something to say about that?" asked the superintendent, tone silky with an undertone of threat.

"No, Sir, not at all! I have nothing to say!" The examiner immediately stood up straight and answered loudly. He knew his superior officer well — if he displayed any hint of hesitation, his punishment would be doubled right away — he had no intention of letting a month's worth of punishment become two or even three months within the blink of an eye.

"Hn. Good. Was there anything else?" The superintendent was satisfied by the examiner's attitude, and so prompted him to explain why he had called to begin with.

The examiner collected himself, and stated formally, "I would like to recommend several children for the special classes."

"Oh?" The superintendent's lips quirked up in a small smile as he waited for the examiner to elaborate.

"Yes. In my opinion, those children are all very promising..." said the examiner after some thought, "but I'm especially taken by 0723, 0724, 0725, and 0729."

"How so?"

"0723 — good foundations, with extraordinary strength for a child. His reflexes are also excellent and better yet, he can think on his feet in battle to the extent that he could be considered a cunning tactician. If we cultivate him intensively, he will definitely become an intelligent strategic-type warrior." The examiner's eyes sparkled as he described his observations of Ling Lan, clearly showing how much Ling Lan's performance had captured his heart.

"0724 — his physical fitness is definitely on a non-human level. He actually managed to break past his body's limits all on his own... He is a true prodigy. As long as the Federation provides focused cultivation, he is very likely to be the next IN mecha operator." By the time the examiner got to the last part of his report on Qi Long, his face was flushed with excitement.

The examiner couldn't be blamed for losing his composure. Aside from Major General Ling Xiao, no one had managed to rise up to the challenge of becoming an IN mecha operator during the past 10 years. And now, he could actually see a glimmer of hope in Qi Long — how could he not lose control?

An IN mecha operator, is it? Was 0724 the only potential candidate? The superintendent's gaze was complicated, shaded by his eyelids, hiding away his true thoughts.

"0725 — cool and level-headed, with commendable logic and an analytical mind. He is definitely an excellent staff officer in the making. I recommend that we focus his training in this direction." The Federation not only needed hot-blooded warriors unafraid of death, but also staff officers capable of planning and taking command, who could deploy strategies from thousands of miles away.

"0729 seems weaker than the other three in comparison, however, he has an unyielding spirit... If we place him together with the other three, this attitude of his could push him to become an excellent soldier, as impressive as the others."

The examiner systematically laid out his thoughts on the four children and then silently waited for his superior officer to make the final decision.

Chapter 38

Who's the Opponent?

After several long seconds of wait, the superintendent's calm voice was transmitted through the communication device, "Your recommendations have been approved! As for the reward for your recommendations, you'll receive them after you rejoin the troops." With that said, the connection was severed without waiting for the examiner's reply.

Although the examiner had been mercilessly hung up on, he wasn't at all unsatisfied. The tight expression on his face loosened, and the hints of a smile could be seen.

He rubbed off the sweat marks on his forehead and breathed a silent sigh — thankful that he had managed to survive his demonic team leader and, of course, pleased at his own penetrating insight.

He had initially thought that this assignment at the scout academy was just a forced break for soldiers like him, something to spice up their routine while providing them with some extra pocket money... he hadn't expected that he would be so lucky as to find such promising young talent, earning him additional recommendation rewards which would actually influence his career progression...

However, he was a little puzzled. Why did even his own demonic team leader get assigned to monitor this test? What the hell was going on here?

The examiner for room 072 was part of the Federation's Special Mecha Forces, a member of the Bladed Special Ops Team, Number 413. This time around, his team had just returned from the battlefield, but before they could settle down and rest they had received military orders to go to the Central Scout Academy to oversee this year's enrolment tests (the final two events).

He still remembered that back then, all the team members had been dumbfounded... After all, they were all considered bloodthirsty killers on the battlefield — and now, just like that, they were expected to switch from being butchers to being nannies to coddle a bunch of kids?

Of course, as the commander of the Mecha Special Forces, their Demonic Leader — that is, the superintendent (this was just the rank they used in public, the true rank was only known within the military workings) that had been on the other end of his communication device earlier — had protested this assignment, but had been summarily ignored. Resigned, their commander could only send out the Special Ops team to become examiners. Still, he hadn't expected the commander himself to be physically present as well...

The superintendent, who was also the commander of the Special Forces, shut down his communication device and then said to his subordinate invigilation officer, "Number 137, you'll be responsible for this. Arrange it so that the four of them enter the special classes, and their results must be average there."

Number 137 blinked, confused. "Huh?"

The superintendent swept an icy gaze at him, but though Number 137 did not make any further noise, his face was full of curiosity as if he really wanted to know what was going on.

The superintendent rubbed his forehead wearily — why were all his subordinates such curious people? 413 was one, and 137 was another.

"The tree that grows above the tree-line... if their results are too good, it'll do more harm than good," explained the superintendent simply. 137 was a hacker — if he didn't give him an acceptable answer, he'd go looking for one himself and may cause all sorts of trouble that way.

137's curiosity was appeased after receiving an answer, so he grinned and said, "Roger that, Sir. Leave everything to me."

Oh, so now he's satisfied he'll call me Sir? The superintendent rolled his eyes and threw a pointed glare at the offbeat 137 before walking away from him to continue supervising his other subordinates as they worked.

Alright, so just within this short period of time when he had stopped to chat with 137, there were already several officers who had begun yawning in the invigilation room, and some had even slumped forwards and fallen asleep...

Hehe! Did they really think this commander of theirs was a lowly superintendent? Actually daring to act so slovenly in front of him... the commander of the Special Forces smiled sinisterly. He wouldn't allow his soldiers to be so unfocused and to lower their guard so casually, even though there was no real danger in this small Central Scout Academy.

"Attention!" he hollered. The entire invigilation room was immediately thrown into disarray, and the sound of howls and wails could be heard. The Demonic Leader would discipline his soldiers, and he wouldn't show mercy regardless of location.

Meanwhile, on Ling Lan's end, she finally reunited with her mother Lan Luofeng under Chamberlain Ling Qin's lead. Lan Luofeng anxiously asked, "Baby, did it go well?" If she hadn't been worried that Ling Lan's gender would be exposed at school, Lan Luofeng would actually care not one whit how her daughter did in the exams. She had never intended for Ling Lan to be a great soldier to begin with.

Ling Lan smugly replied, "Of course. Who do you think I am?" The self-confidence writ all over her face lay Lan Luofeng's worries to rest, and she too smiled along with Ling Lan.

For the sake of her mother's happiness, Ling Lan was used to acting cute and playing the child. However, her efforts weren't in vain — Lan Luofeng, who had originally been overwhelmed with sadness at her father's passing, had slowly shifted her focus onto Ling Lan and had slowly regained her spirits; hope had rekindled in her eyes as the sadness became muted.

The final results would only be announced half an hour after all the tests ended. Ling Lan didn't know how much longer the other children would take to complete the exam, so waiting here was obviously not a good idea. As such, she suggested to Lan Luofeng that they go home to wait for the results. After all, the final results would be posted on the Central Scout Academy's website, available for public perusal.

Lan Luofeng thought about it and agreed, and so brought Ling Lan home.

As the sky slowly darkened into night, the final student finally completed the exam at the Central Scout Academy. All the invigilators, who were responsible for keying in the

marks, entered the scores they had collected into the Central Scout Academy's main system. The system would then calculate and tally up the marks before arranging them in descending order to produce a name list.

Number 137 was excitedly flexing his fingers at this moment, warming them up for his upcoming performance. Being one of the top 10 hackers in the virtual world, he must definitely accomplish the mission his commander had assigned him flawlessly.

In Ling Lan's home, Lan Luofeng was seated before a large screen, patiently refreshing the Central Scout Academy's website again and again, waiting for the announcement of the final results.

Meanwhile, Ling Lan was lying down on the couch, talking with Little Four in her mind.

"Little Four, can you go online from this position?" Ling Lan asked worriedly. She knew that Little Four could access the internet wirelessly within a certain radius.

Little Four looked like he had everything under control. *"No problem, even a little further is fine."*

"Little Four, I only want you to enter the Central Scout Academy system to ensure that I can enter the special classes — don't go and do anything else," reminded Ling Lan.

Although Ling Lan was confident, she had still decided to let Little Four keep a lookout for her results, just in case. It wouldn't do for someone else to mess around with the results after all. It had to be said that Ling Lan was very cautious.

137 managed to infiltrate the Central Scout Academy's main system successfully, however, his entry didn't go unnoticed by the watchful Little Four. *"Eh? Someone really did show up... he's gonna die."* Little Four was incensed. This sort of action was like waving a red flag at a bull. Remember, he was like a god on the web — who was it that dared to challenge his authority?!

Ling Lan sensed Little Four's anger and hurriedly asked, *"What's happening, Little Four?"*

Little Four pouted as he huffed, *"Someone has infiltrated the system. It looks like he wants to change your scores. Let me get rid of him now..."* Little Four looked like he already had his knife sharpened and ready to slaughter the poor invader.

"Wait, no hurry. Let's see what he wants to do first. Also, can you track his location?"

Ling Lan was very calm. Stopping the other prematurely wasn't going to solve the problem and would just alarm the opponent. It would be wiser to just observe for now, and try to figure out the other's background. Ling Lan liked to know all the facts before acting — but if the opponent really seemed to harbour evil intentions, of course she wouldn't choose to be merciful.

Chapter 39

Modifying the Scores

In the mind-space, Little Four acknowledged Ling Lan's reminder out loud and then became silent and unmoving. Ling Lan knew then that Little Four's consciousness had already gone into the virtual network, leaving behind an empty shell.

10,000 years' worth of technological advancement, as well as the emergence of spiritual power, had greatly changed the methods and approaches of modern-day hackers. Becoming a hacker nowadays was no longer a purely learned skill; it also required some natural hacking talent. This talent referred to human spiritual power and the ability to disguise and hide one's true self.

The assessment to categorise spiritual power could only be done after the age of ten, because that was when the spiritual power of a child matured and started to evolve into different types, which would determine the direction of their development and cultivation.

Of course, Ling Lan did not know at this time that spiritual power would evolve that way, nor did she know that the internet hackers these days were so much more dangerous and terrifying than the ones from 10,000 years ago. These days, a battle between hackers could easily result in death or injury, while brain death was a rather common consequence.

In this era, hacker battles were known as death battles without gun-smoke — they were, at times, considered even more dangerous than real battles.

Still, it was fortunate that Ling Lan didn't know, otherwise she would never have let Little Four go into the system. In her heart, Little Four had become her most cherished relative. Even though the risk of her secret being exposed would be much higher if she didn't manage to get into the special classes, the problem wasn't insurmountable. If Little Four disappeared because of the dangers of hacking, however, she would never have been able to accept it.

The moment Little Four's consciousness entered the dummy avatar he had embedded in the Central Scout Academy's systems, 137 jerked to a stop, immediately pausing his

actions in modifying the scores.

As expected of a top-tier hacker in the Federation — even though Little Four's entrance had been exceedingly subtle, 137's keen spiritual power had still sensed some disturbance in his surroundings. Cold sweat started dripping from his forehead.

Examiner 413, who was standing guard beside his physical body, stiffened — could it be that 137 was in danger? 137 was only trying to change the scores because of his recommendations — if 137 were to be harmed doing so, he would never forgive himself. Although the bonuses he would get from these recommendations were considerable, his teammate was much more important.

Number 137 was very careful, surreptitiously sending out mental feelers to investigate. Although he had no idea who his opponent was, he knew that it had to be someone formidable to be able to hide his presence so well.

Little Four observed all this coolly. He wasn't restricted by human limits on the net, whereby each person was only limited to one online avatar. Even hackers were not exempt from these limits — the most a hacker could do was to disguise his identity and obscure his entry point. In contrast, as long as he was online, he could divide himself into multiple avatars with a snap of his fingers, and conceal himself inside the very fabric of the internet itself.

Little Four merely had to trace the spiritual power of his opponent to find his entry point. Although the opponent did use some spiritual power to hide his identity and location, these little tricks were like child's play to Little Four. With no trouble at all, Little Four had managed to lock onto his opponent.

However, when he tapped into a monitoring device at the opponent's location and saw examiner 413, he knew that the matter wasn't the problem he had assumed it would be.

He swiftly relayed this scene to Ling Lan in the mind-space and Ling Lan was stunned at the sight of their examiner Number 413.

"What are they trying to do?" Ling Lan wondered. After all, her current scores had been given by the examiner to begin with. She had already found out her final score a few minutes ago, and although she did not rank first (because her intelligence score was just too horrible), she had easily secured second place, so she was already certain

to get into the special classes.

If the examiner did not want her to enter the special classes, he could have just given her a low score directly — there was no reason at all for him to go to so much trouble with a hacker to change her scores now. Could it be that there was some other motive for his actions?

Ling Lan decided to just stay back and observe for now; she could always make a decision after she found out what he was up to.

Of course, Ling Lan could afford to be so daring because she had Little Four's guarantee that, no matter what the other did, he could reverse it with minimal effort.

Meanwhile, Number 137 had spread out his spiritual power to explore the surrounding several times, but still did not manage to catch even a glimpse of the other person in the system. This caused him to be jumpy, and he started to doubt himself — could it be that he was too uptight, causing his senses to be fooled by paranoia?

Time was running out and no matter how hard 137 looked, he could not find the source of the disturbance he had felt. 137 felt helpless as he saw that there wasn't much time left, and recalling that he still hadn't completed the mission his commander had assigned him, he decided that he would just try to modify Ling Lan's score first.

He had already thought it through — the moment he sensed anything off about the situation, he would turn tail and run. 137 wasn't so arrogant as to believe that he would be able to handle a professional whose presence he could not even confirm. Therefore, for safety reasons, running away was the best solution.

His decision made, 137 carefully began to modify Ling Lan's score. Naturally, he dared not touch the scores of the first two tests, which had not been under their jurisdiction. Any changes there would be easily caught. Only the scores for stamina and speed had been controlled by their special ops team, keyed in by 413 and himself, and so could be freely altered. If any problem really occurred, their commander would be there to vouch for them, so he wasn't afraid.

Of course, before this, 413 and he had considered just keying in a lower score. However, they had no idea how the other children from the other groups would do — if the score they entered turned out to be too low, or if something happened so they were unable to change the scores later... Wouldn't it be such a shame for these children

to lose their spot in the special classes? So, with a mind to minimise the risk of that happening, they had decided to key in the original high scores.

Following 137's edits, Ling Lan's total score shifted, dropping her rank from the initial 2nd to the 17th place.

After 137 finished his edits to Ling Lan's score, he waited patiently for a long moment. Finding no change in his surroundings, he moved on to modify Qi Long's, Han Jijyun's, and Luo Lang's scores as well, causing them to fall from 3rd, 5th, and 6th place, to the 18th, 21st, and 24th place.

137 did not forget what his commander had said: to guarantee the four children's entry into Special Class-A, but to do so in a way that was low-profile so that they did not gain too much attention. Right now, these middle-of-the-pack scores and rankings should resolve all of his commander's worries. After all, the first 50 students would enter Special Class-A, while students ranked 51-100 would go into Special Class-B.

Little Four reported the modified scores and rankings to Ling Lan, and Ling Lan finally realised what the examiner had intended. Looks like he was doing this out of good intentions — these rankings right now were very nice, not too outstanding yet not too shabby.

She had originally been worried whether or not her second place ranking was too eye-catching since Ling Lan did not want to become the centre of attention, which would further increase the risk of her secret being exposed. The only problem was, she had not dared to change her score herself. After all, there were way too many people who were involved with these scores — any changes would likely be discovered instantly, so Ling Lan did not dare to move hastily. And now, the examiner had solved the problem for her, so she was free to enjoy the results without having to do anything.

Still, Ling Lan was puzzled. "Who is this examiner really?"

The other children may not know, but Ling Lan could tell — the inconcealable taint of blood on the examiner's aura was something that could only be found on veterans who had fought and struggled through war and cruel battles... he was completely different from the officers who had been in charge of the intelligence and strength tests.

Ling Lan would never forget the satisfaction shining from the examiner's eyes as he sent them off. Perhaps the faction within the Federation that he represented had their

eye on the four of them and so were willing to go the extra mile to protect them as they grew?

Whatever the case, this was a good thing! Ling Lan quickly put this matter to rest at the back of her mind.

Chapter 40

Downed By a Glass of Wine!

Although 137 had successfully completed his mission, he still felt restless and unsettled. Something just didn't feel right. For that reason, after leaving the virtual network, he immediately reported to his commander on the strange disturbance he had sensed in the Central Scout Academy's system.

After hearing 137's report, the commander's expression became stern. Could it really be as the General suspected? Were the culprits behind Major General Ling Xiao's death on the move again?

He indicated to 137 to leave things as they were, and reminded him about the code of silence before letting him go back and rest. He then turned on his communication device and entered a number he rarely ever contacted.

It wasn't long before a middle-aged general appeared on the holographic screen, a serious expression on his face.

"Yo, Sir General, long time no see." At odds with his usual cold persona in front of his troops, the commander was now casually flippant.

"Oh, it's you, you little brat. Aren't you back on mandatory leave? Why are you free to contact me?" The familiar voice of the commander caused the general's face to soften.

"Wasn't it the military who sent us to the Central Scout Academy to take charge of the tests?" complained the commander casually.

The general's face stiffened and he said in a rush, "Being with kids is also a way of relaxing."

The commander laughed. "True!"

And the matter ended there. It had been implicit in the general's words that their assignment to the school had something to do with him.

"So what do you want, brat?" The general knew that this son of his old friend, who he had watched grow up from a little kid, would not contact him for no reason. Usually, he wouldn't see hide nor hair of him; the brat would scurry away faster than any mouse.

Reminded of his purpose in calling, the commander's expression turned grim. He faithfully reported what had happened to Ling Lan, as well as the disturbance 137 had felt on the virtual network. Since their presence at the scout academy had been by the general's design, then it was very likely related to the matter of Ling Xiao's son.

"Duly noted," said the general calmly, "Let someone else handle things after this — don't get any further involved."

The commander replied lowly, "Understood," and then asked, "Will there be any danger to Major General Ling Xiao's son?" From the general's words, he could somehow guess what the general was planning.

The general did not answer his question, only saying, "Enjoy your vacation. Don't worry about anything else." With those parting words, he ended the call.

The commander stared vacantly at the dark screen, and a shadow passed over his face. The general's words had indirectly told him the answer. The general himself couldn't guarantee that there would be no mishaps in his current arrangements.

The commander knew very well that, for the future of the Federation, some sacrifices were necessary. The moles hidden in the higher ranks of the federal military had to be dug out, otherwise another incident like Ling Xiao's would happen again — and the Federation couldn't afford to lose any more god-class operators.

Still, he felt a little indignant. In service of the Federation, his idol Major General Ling Xiao had already been sacrificed — did his child have to be sacrificed too? He stood for a long moment, staring blindly into the distance, and after much thought, decided that he had to be true to his heart just this once.

He dialled a contact number and was quickly connected. "413, I'm sorry to inform you that your vacation has been cancelled." After coming to a decision, the initial melancholy of the commander had been swept away and he was even jovial enough to joke around with 413 now.

413's wails of despair came over from the other end of the communicator, but the

commander's heart was like steel and he blithely ignored 413's mournful eyes. He continued to order, "Please accept your new assignment."

Hearing this, number 413 straightened out his long face and stood at attention. "Number 413, reporting for duty!"

"Starting now, for the next month, you and your squad are to protect Ling Lan of the Central Scout Academy in secret." The commander hoped that his arrangements would be able to ensure the safety of Major General Ling Xiao's child, as a personal tribute to his departed idol.

"Ling Lan? Who's that?" asked 413, bewildered. They had just finished their assignment at the Central Scout Academy, but before he could even celebrate their release from babysitting duties, here he was, about to become a full-time nanny. Luckily he wasn't going to suffer through this alone – he had 5 underlings in his squad – which made him feel just a little bit better.

"It's that 0723 you like so much," said the commander.

413's expression grew serious. "Has the enemy nation noticed him? Is he in danger?" 413 knew that there were many foreign spies hiding within the federation. Many promising young talents had barely had the time to sprout before they were cruelly crushed by the enemy nation.

"Perhaps," said the commander, without certainty. After all, it was all just speculation on his part.

"Roger that, Sir. I'll protect him well with my squad. You can count on it," said 413 resolutely. He might have moaned a bit more if it were some other child, but if it was number 0723, he had no objections whatsoever.

Indeed, if Ling Lan didn't veer off from the right path, it was almost 100% certain that he would become an ace operator, perhaps even an imperial operator. Ever since Major General Ling Xiao had passed away, the Federation was stretched thin for skilled operators. Therefore, any young talent who had the potential to become ace operators were very highly valued by the Federation.

"Wait a moment. I will ask 137 to transmit Ling Lan's information into your communicator. Remember, this is a secret assignment. Don't let anyone notice your presence," instructed the commander.

"Yes!"

One day later, the official notification letter from the Central Scout Academy arrived on the Ling family's general notification device, informing them about Ling Lan's acceptance into the academy's special class. The news made the long silent Ling family rejoice.

Looking at the information contained in the letter, Lan Luofeng's mood was exceptionally light. Although she wouldn't have minded if Ling Lan became an idle playboy, all parents took pride in their child's successes and Lan Luofeng was no exception. Of course, most importantly, Ling Lan's enrolment into Special Class-A meant that she didn't have to study on school grounds and could freely choose her own courses, which greatly reduced the risk of her true gender being discovered — this was the greatest source of joy for Lan Luofeng.

In a great mood, Lan Luofeng decided that a grand celebration was in order. She thus instructed Chamberlain Ling Qin to prepare a feast for the entire Ling household to come together and celebrate. This was the first large-scale party held ever since the family head Ling Xiao had died — the lively atmosphere moved Chamberlain Ling Qin almost to tears.

This was also the first time Ling Lan met all the external servants and workers of the Ling household. Of course, some of the guards maintaining the safety of the Ling household perimeters were not in attendance, but the other servants and workers were all there. Seeing all of their excited and hopeful faces, Ling Lan felt pressured for the first time ever. So she wasn't living just for herself... she was shouldering the hopes and dreams of the entire Ling household.

And this group didn't even include the Ling family loyalists yet — if the Ling family ceased to exist, there would be no reason for the loyalists to exist either.

For the first time, Ling Lan truly understood what her new identity meant, along with the responsibilities she had to carry with it. Although the total age of her two lives was already over 30 years old, making her a mature adult, she was still just used to being an average person, only responsible for her own wellbeing. But now, all of a sudden, she had so many people's hopes and livelihoods resting upon her shoulders... She panicked.

The typically serene Ling Lan, finally unable to hold on any longer, subconsciously reached out for a glass of red wine and gulped it in down in one shot, and then... she tragically fell over, dead drunk.

If you must know, in her past life, due to her body's condition, Ling Lan had been prohibited from consuming any drinks and alcoholic beverages that might affect the body. And then, in this life, she had been prevented from imbibing by Lan Luofeng due to her young age. Therefore, neither her mind nor her small body could withstand the assault of alcohol, causing her to be downed by just one glass of wine.

Chapter 41

Wilderness Training?

Ling Lan was a cute drunk — she did not start babbling nonsense, nor did she fly into a drunken rage. She only fell asleep silently, a saliva bubble popping up at the edge of her lips every once in a while.

This adorable sight made Lan Luofeng laugh despite her annoyance. She had just taken her eyes off this child for a moment and she had gone and gotten herself drunk on red wine. Still, this was the only time Ling Lan really looked like a true six year old child, sleeping innocently without a care in the world.

Lan Luofeng knew that these couple of years had actually been really tough on Ling Lan. Every day she had training assignments, and Lan Luofeng had watched with tearful eyes as she trained till she dropped. (In truth, Little Four had notified Ling Lan that time was up so she would get some rest. It wasn't that Ling Lan was slacking off, but her body was really still too weak. Overexerting her body now in training would only cause irreparable harm, harm that even the Qi exercises would not be able to repair.)

Lan Luofeng could not stop her training however, because she knew that this would benefit Ling Lan greatly in the future. The Federation was a world where the fittest survived — an extra measure of strength meant an extra measure of safety. For Ling Lan's future, she had to harden her heart.

Lan Luofeng quickly bundled Ling Lan up and carried her to her room. Ever since Ling Lan could clearly communicate what she wanted, she had demanded a personal room of her own. Lan Luofeng was an overindulgent mother with no bottom-line when it came to her child, so she had caved with minimal fuss and provided a lone room for Ling Lan.

Carefully placing Ling Lan on her bed, Lan Luofeng dropped a light kiss on Ling Lan's adorable round face and then shut the door behind her as she left. What she didn't know was that, though Ling Lan looked as if she was sound asleep, her consciousness had actually been dragged ruthlessly into the mind-space by Instructor Number One.

Ling Lan felt extremely wobbly, finding it rather difficult to stay on her feet, and the things she looked at seemed to waver in her sight.

She felt a little nauseous and so quickly squatted down, gripping her head. Ling Lan just had to squat, lest she fall over the very next second from losing her balance.

"Hmph. How dare you drink." Number One's expression darkened further at the sight, and with a flick of his finger, a basinful of cold water splashed down upon Ling Lan from above. The sudden shock caused Ling Lan to shiver uncontrollably and her muddled senses abruptly came into focus.

"Instructor Number One, you look well!" Ling Lan smiled awkwardly as she lifted her head, her expression pleading for mercy.

"I am very not well." Instructor Number One paid no mind to Ling Lan's pleading, giving her no face as he told her in no uncertain terms that he was angry.

Instructor Number One's words made Ling Lan break out into cold sweat — without even having to ask, she knew that the 'not well' Instructor Number One was talking about had something to do with her. Could it be that she had somehow irritated this fearsome demon instructor without even knowing it?

Looking at Ling Lan's bewildered face, Instructor Number One raged, "In today's fight, what were you doing?! Is that how you were meant to use what Number Nine had taught you?"

Ling Lan was indignant, "I managed to hit the examiner."

"Well you could have hit him directly without having to resort to trickery! If you do this again, don't blame me for punishing you." Instructor Number One firmly believed that honest strength was the true path — any sort of underhanded tricks were all dishonest methods, which should not be relied upon.

Ling Lan paid no mind to the mention of punishment, but asked in surprise, "You mean that, I can actually hit the examiner with my own strength right now?" If that was the case, then why had she felt so overpowered? That the opponent's strength was so much higher than her own? Was it all an illusion?

But then, all three of them had already used up all their strength and skills to fight the examiner for so long... it was only when they were running out of strength that they had thought up that trick to hit the examiner. Of course, Ling Lan didn't think that using tricks was wrong or unfair — on the battlefield, survival was the only principle.

"That's right. In today's battle, you missed three opportunities." That said, Number One flicked yet another finger and the scene of today's battle appeared before Ling Lan's eyes.

"The first sneak attack was done well at the beginning. You remembered what Number Nine had told you, and kept your killing intent hidden, but when you were just about to succeed, your heart wavered." Number One pointed at the scene, showing how when Ling Lan's punch was just about to hit the examiner, there was a fluctuation in her aura. This little fluctuation had let the examiner sense her attack, which was how he had managed to block her attack in that final second.

"For the second sneak attack, you made the exact same mistake, losing your attention at the critical moment." Number One's voice grew colder and colder, and he looked as if he wished he could drag Ling Lan over to give her a good beating right now. She had obviously learned everything properly — why was she making such stupid mistakes in a real fight? If Ling Lan had only fought as she had trained, the examiner would have been hit by that very first move.

"What angers me the most is that you don't even know how to change your own attack approach. Using the same moves over and over again — after failing in a sneak attack twice, even an idiot would know to watch out for your sneak attacks... and still you persisted with sneak attacks! Is your head filled with the brain of a pig?" Instructor Number One's rage was incandescent as he observed Ling Lan's third attempt at a sneak attack playing out before them.

"After being discovered, it's alright to just fight directly with the opponent, but what were you thinking using all your might for every single move? What will you use then to defend yourself? Also, don't you know how to mix in some feints among your real moves? Here, when your right elbow was blocked, and you continued to use your left elbow — both the opponent's arms had been used for defense, and because of your friend's attack on his waist, his only usable leg had been neutralised. Why didn't you take the chance to attack his lower body? Didn't you learn the Scorpion Tail Swipe? This was clearly a great chance for you to score a hit. What disappoints me the most is that you did not notice any of the errors you made during your fight, or even the

missed chances — you are literally a combat idiot."

Many prodigies would often notice their own weaknesses during battle, but unfortunately, Ling Lan did not notice anything at all in her fight up till the very end. Even now, she had still been pleased with herself over her successful trick, which was why Instructor Number One was so angry. "If it wasn't the fact that the opponent wanted to know how much you all could do, you would have already been killed at this point." Instructor Number One rolled back the scene to when she had started facing the examiner directly, pointing out how the examiner had stopped many of his moves halfway through so as to avoid injuring Ling Lan.

Under Instructor Number One's detailed analysis, Ling Lan grew more and more ashamed. She had really thought she had performed pretty well in that battle, but who knew that she had actually done so badly, making mistake after mistake. Her elation at having hit the examiner today disappeared without a trace, leaving behind a cold ball of shame in her gut and her back drenched with sweat.

"Looks like we need to have a round of wilderness training. We'll see what to do next after you learn how to hunt!" Instructor Number One coolly announced Ling Lan's fate.

Before Ling Lan could ask any questions or beg for mercy, Instructor Number One had flicked his finger once again. Ling Lan saw the scenery change around her, and then she was standing in a primordial forest with Number One. She could hear the sound of a flowing stream in the distance, as well as the fearsome calls of some unknown wild beasts.

Ling Lan's little heart felt like it was beating out of her chest. Although she had never spent much time in a forest before, she knew that this type of place was rife with danger — not only were there wild beasts wandering around, nature itself was an intimidating thing, and there were also other unknown terrors lurking within.

Ling Lan's face fell rapidly, however, she knew that this hunting mission was definitely unavoidable. This year had taught her that once Instructor Number One had made up his mind, nothing was going to change it.

Still, she intended to try and plead with Instructor Number One for just a little more preparation time, so she could go back and ask Little Four for some wilderness survival tips. Unfortunately, Instructor Number One saw through her plans, and without giving her the chance to speak he said, please enjoy yourself, and promptly

disappeared in a flash of light from this endlessly verdant world.

Dammit! Number One, you are truly vicious!

Ling Lan savagely directed her middle finger towards the direction where Number One had been standing in a display of futile anger.

Chapter 42

Hunting and Being Hunted!

Dawn. When the first ray of sunlight penetrated the dense foliage of the forest, slowly lending it its warmth, the originally quiescent green world began to wake up once again. Various creatures started crawling out of their nests, beginning a new cycle of their daily routine —— hunting and being hunted.

On the ground, an unnamed little creature with wrinkled skin was stealthily making its way over to its destination. It was very small, only roughly the size of two human fists, but it dragged a wide flat tail behind it that was twice the length of its body.

It had no choice but to be careful. In this forest, 80% of the animals could kill it easily — and unfortunately, its meat was tender, so even though it was small and had very little meat, many of the larger creatures still wouldn't mind hunting it as an appetiser.

Its intended destination was an area full of shallow water depressions up ahead. That area was a swampland, very suitable for its survival, because its light weight and body shape allowed it to move freely around the swamp without sinking into it. Aside from those creatures whose natural habitat was the swamp, other creatures could not even enter the area, making it much safer for the creature.

Of course, most importantly, there was food for it here as well, making it well worth its while to come here. It almost started drooling thinking of food — the fish in the shallow depressions here were just too tasty.

It finally made it there, smooth sailing all the way.

At this time, in the shallow water of the numerous depressions, fish the length of fingers were joyfully swimming around, darting from one depression to another. All of the depressions were connected by countless narrow streams of water — although these streams were much too small for bigger fish to get through, they allowed these small fish to swim between the depressions unhindered. In one particular depression, the fish were greedily nibbling on some of the water weeds, oblivious to the fact that their natural enemy had arrived and was getting ready to feast on them to satisfy its hunger.

The wrinkled animal entered the swamp and darted swiftly into one of the depressions. The fish scattered in fright, but swam blindly in their panic, ending up in a dead end... In the end, their only outcome was to be devoured by the agile wrinkled creature.

After eating up the fishes in this depression, the creature climbed out of it and shook itself, causing the water droplets on its body to go flying, until its skin was once again as dry and pristine as before.

It then rested for a little while. Hunting was not easy — actions that seemed easy actually took up a lot of its body strength. Still, even while it rested, it vigilantly kept a lookout on its surroundings, afraid that a strong enemy would appear to eat it.

Soon after, it had regained its strength, and had begun sneaking over to the next depression...

However, it did not notice — in the swamp not too far away from it, a pair of gelid eyes had locked themselves on its figure, prepared to ambush it during its next meal.

When it once again leapt into another depression to capture more fish, the owner of the gelid eyes struck. A thick black cable shot out, skirting by the edges of the depression, and the wrinkled animal was gone. The clear sound of flesh hitting water could be heard and then a water snake as thick as a man's arm could be seen sitting in the middle of the depression, its lower half curled up neatly beneath it. From a glance, it looked like it was about three metres long, perhaps more.

In its mouth, the wrinkled creature was struggling with all its might, flapping its wide tail around, but to no avail. It was swallowed by the water snake, bit by bit, until it finally disappeared completely into the snake's gullet.

The water snake raised its head, waiting for its food to travel down its throat into its stomach. And then, right at this moment, a large maw appeared abruptly beside it, sharp teeth glinting menacingly in the sunlight. Before the water snake could react, it had already been bitten, right where it was most vulnerable.

Of course, the water snake was unwilling to just lay back and die — before it died, it used the whole length of its three metre long body to wrap tightly around the opponent, hoping to bring it along with it into death. Unfortunately, the opponent was still clamped onto its vital point, so it could not hold on for long. It soon died, and its

coils loosened around its attacker.

And then, a hulking creature climbed out from the depths of the swamp. Its overall appearance looked very much like that of Earth's crocodiles, but compared to a crocodile, its body was even larger, and its four limbs were even thicker.

It was the king of this swamp, and its favourite food was naturally the fastest and stealthiest water snakes. However, water snakes were extremely hard to catch — the moment they saw its shadow, they would flee immediately, slithering swiftly into the swamp water and disappearing completely. Thus, it could only disguise itself and wait patiently – at times up to a whole day and night – to get its prize. Today, it would eat well.

It raised its head and opened its jaws wide, putting this large snake into its mouth, slowly tearing it into pieces as it chewed and swallowed. Halfway through its meal, while half of the snake's body was still dangling outside its mouth, it caught sight of a dark shadow falling rapidly from above it with the corner of its eye.

Dammit, what creature dares to disturb the King of the Swamp at its meal? It did not even consider the possibility of an ambush — it was the undisputed king of the food chain here, no creature would dare think of hunting it...

Before it could take a closer look, it felt a bone-deep piercing pain starting from its mouth go through its entire body. It let out a furious roar, a sign of its rage and disbelief that a creature would dare to harm it. It wanted to tear that creature apart with its sharp teeth, but found that it could not close its mouth anymore.

No, it wasn't that it couldn't close it — somehow, sometime, a wooden staff had made its way into its mouth. It tried to dislodge the staff, but then found that it couldn't move its body either.

Indeed, it was like it had been pinned to the ground. Aside from flinging its limbs around uselessly, it could not move at all. It had no idea what was going on, and as rage continued to build within it, it tried to roar again, but now found that it couldn't even do that anymore. And then the pain hit, coursing through every part of its body, so intense that it couldn't handle it. What the heck was going on?

"So troublesome." Along with this voice, an extremely fragile looking thing appeared by its head. And then, the creature's final memory was of the strange creature lifting

its scrawny foot above its head and stomping down viciously.

Without any change in her expression, Ling Lan pulled her foot out from the skull of this king of the swamp. She had no interest in watching the death struggle of the creature and so had kindly put it out of its misery by stomping through its skull.

Looking at the white brain matter all over her shoes, Ling Lan no longer felt the disgust she had felt at the beginning. The current Ling Lan was enveloped by an aura of honed aggression, just like a king of the jungle; she was no longer the weak and timid person she was before.

Of course, with Ling Lan's current strength, fighting this creature in the swamp head on was not impossible. However, this fellow's skin was as strong as steel and Ling Lan had no weapons which could pierce through it. This skin it had was exactly why it could withstand the water snake's desperate counterattack at the end. Still, all creatures had their weaknesses and this swamp king was no exception.

The insides of the swamp king was very fragile, which was why the swamp king normally would not leave its mouth open. For the only way to attack its insides, was through its mouth. As such, Ling Lan had decided to conceal herself within the swamp and wait till the swamp king started hunting. And when the swamp king had started to eat, she had taken the opportunity to stuff a small tree down its throat, all the way to its tail, sealing its fate with one blow.

Getting to this point was not easy for Ling Lan. Many times, due to problems with emotional control, the swamp king had managed to sense her killing intent and evade her attack, causing her to lose her chance. Thus, Ling Lan had paid the price of death several times over before she finally grasped the ability to hunt flawlessly. The trials and difficulties she went through in the entire process were truly too numerous to be cited.

Chapter 43

The Experience of Death!

Ling Lan had initially thought that she would have to stay in this virtual forest for up to two or three years before she would get used to it and see some results... but in reality, humans were exceedingly smart and adaptable creatures. Especially for those who were already equipped with offensive and defensive abilities, adapting to this dangerous environment was even easier than expected. Within a month, Ling Lan was now able to move freely through the forest.

Ling Lan had never been a reckless person, so when Instructor Number One had disappeared, she had been very, very cautious with her every step. After all, having never been in the wild before, the forest was an unknown swathe of darkness in her eyes. Furthermore, she strongly believed that this forest was a terrifying place — so her first thought was not about hunting, but rather on how she would be able to survive to see the light of the next day.

Reality proved that she had still been too naïve and had underestimated the dangers of the forest. She had not even made it till the night of the first day before she had been bitten by some unknown venomous insects hidden within the grass. This was her first experience with death — in the net-speak of her previous world, her virgin death.

Frankly, Ling Lan's virgin death was not at all easy. It could even be described as gory, capable of turning the stomach of anyone who saw it — the scene of her death was unbelievably horrific.

For the rest of her life, Ling Lan never wanted to experience that sort of death ever again. The venom of the insects had been potently vicious, causing immense pain to its victim. This pain was even worse than the pain she had endured through her sickness from her previous life, even more penetrating than the pain she had endured during the medicinal baths of this life — because on top of the pain, was an uncontrollable itch that could not be resisted... she would never forget it.

For three whole days, Ling Lan had suffered and itched. She had watched as she personally scratched away the bloody flesh from her body bit by bit, and all she had felt then was relief and a perverse sort of pleasure, until her body had been reduced

to scraps of skin and flesh hanging on an almost empty skeleton. Only then did she breathe her last breath.

Back then, she had thought that that was the end of it, that she was finally free from the torments of this forest, free to go back to reality. But when she opened her eyes once again, she was back where Instructor Number One had first dumped her, still within the forest. It was then that Ling Lan realised that this virtual world created by the learning space was not as simple as she had assumed — she would not be able to return to reality just by waiting it out.

It was tied up with a mission — so until the mission was completed, she was stuck here, unable to return.

Thus, even though she was still traumatised by her first death experience, for the sake of returning to reality, Ling Lan had no choice but to buck up and force herself to continue exploring the forest so that she could complete her mission. Ling Lan had not forgotten what Instructor Number One had said — his words had clearly indicated that she was to learn how to hunt.

However, when Ling Lan managed to kill one of the forest creatures weaker than her, the learning space did not react at all. This told Ling Lan that she would not be able to accomplish this mission on a technicality — she would most likely have to kill a fierce beast several times stronger than her for it to count.

And so she started challenging this primordial forest. She encountered many dangers along the way — some she managed to escape, while most of the others naturally resulted in her death.

She had been devoured by a swarm of ants, eaten alive until she was nothing but bones. She had been ambushed by an adorable looking animal, small but vicious, ending up as its meal. And she had also died from eating some poisonous fruits by accident, as well as experienced being bitten by some pestilent mosquitoes, dying in the end from the ravages of disease.

However, all these countless deaths were not for nothing — Ling Lan gradually learned how to survive in this primordial forest. She absorbed all the knowledge she gained from her deaths, throwing away the kind and softer emotions that were unnecessary here, only keeping her level-headedness and her ruthlessness. From then on, all the creatures in the forest had only two labels in her eyes ——‘threat’ or ‘food’.

Through it all, Ling Lan gradually shifted from her initial timid and uncertain self into her current cool and self-composed persona. She could now face any danger without fear, and confidence oozed from her every pore. The entire forest was like her own backyard to her now — she knew all the animals and hazards here as well as the palm of her hand.

This time, she had decided to hunt the swamp king after much thought and consideration. Even though the terrain here was more treacherous than many other areas within the forest, this also meant that the swamp king had a much lower guard than the other kings of the forest. Due to a lack of contest, the swamp king was also comparatively weaker, and although the terrain was to the swamp king's advantage, it wasn't necessarily a disadvantage for Ling Lan either.

And so, Ling Lan had set a trap. Her first few attempts all ended in failure, where she often ended up as the swamp king's excrement, only managing to escape a handful of times. However, every failure added to her experience and Ling Lan slowly but surely started to grasp the swamp king's hunting habits. To give the swamp king a false sense of security, although Ling Lan had been lying in ambush every day, she had not made a move for over a week...

Ling Lan could still remember Instructor Number One's rebuke, saying that she did not know how to mix feints into her attacks, that continuous sneak attacks were not really sneak attacks anymore. And Ling Lan did not want to make the same mistake twice.

Finally, today, Ling Lan saw a rare opportunity. Perhaps because Ling Lan had not attacked at all this week, the swamp king seemed to think that it had killed off all the stupid animals that dared threaten it. Moreover, it had just managed to capture its favourite snack of juicy, tender water snake, putting it in a great mood, and so it had subconsciously let down its guard...

Which was when Ling Lan had struck. This time, Ling Lan finally managed to deal a beautiful killing blow, which was also proof that Ling Lan had truly mastered the art of hiding her killing intent, successfully nabbing her prey.

As the swamp king fell dead before her, Ling Lan closed her eyes and reflected on how she had felt back when she had dealt the killing blow. There had been no agitation, no excitement, only cool patience and focus — Ling Lan savoured the difference between her previous attacks and this one, and understood that she had been too hasty before,

too concerned with the final outcome to maintain her composure. The moment the still pool of her emotions had rippled, her killing intent had seeped out.

Ling Lan laughed as her hands tightened into fists. Perhaps she could go back now and leave this godforsaken place behind. Although Ling Lan was no longer afraid of the primordial forest, it didn't mean she liked it here. It was too lonely here – there was no one to talk to, no one to spare her any bit of warmth – she was just about to have a breakdown over the imposed solitude. It was just fortunate that she had great mental fortitude, otherwise she'd have already been driven insane by now.

Just then, Ling Lan sensed a change in her surroundings, coming from right behind her. She did not turn around, but her posture shifted minutely so that she would be ready to defend herself and fight back at any moment.

"Not bad at all!" A familiar voice rang out from behind her, and Ling Lan felt rage roil within her even as she felt a profound sense of relief.

Without thinking, she sprung backwards with a dip of her feet, leaning back as she flew through the air, flipped into a somersault, and then facing that man, she resolutely unleashed her leg into a savage kick aimed in his direction...

Dammit, Number One, you bastard! I'll kick you to death! The long-suffering Ling Lan could no longer keep calm.

Instructor Number One was expressionless as always — seeing Ling Lan's attack, he did not even move his feet, merely holding out two fingers and aiming them at Ling Lan's incoming foot.

"Bam!" The two clashed, producing a rather muffled sound, and Ling Lan felt a huge wave of energy swell from the bottom of her foot. Her entire body was thrown backwards, and that delicate foot that was capable of crushing the swamp king's skull actually felt a little numb, losing all combat ability in a moment.

Ling Lan took control of her body in mid-air with a twist of her waist, allowing her to land on her feet right back where she had started, on top of the dead swamp king's head.

Chapter 44

Resolving a Potential Problem

"Still able to unleash your anger, I see. Looks like you've adapted well." Number One stood in the air before Ling Lan, an almost imperceptible trace of mirth in his eyes as he acknowledged Ling Lan's achievements for the first time.

Ling Lan couldn't help the little surge of happiness she felt at Instructor Number One's words, feeling as if she had been praised by an elder. However, Ling Lan was not so easily placated — her face stony, she asked huffily, "Instructor Number One, weren't you afraid that I would be driven insane by this cruel environment?"

Ling Lan knew very well that if she hadn't been so mentally resilient, this primordial forest was totally capable of driving a regular adult out of his or her mind, much less an apparent six year old child like her. No matter how talented the child was, he or she would not be able to survive for long in this fearsome forest.

Although one could revive countless times in here, the various horrific ways of dying and their realistic rendering upon one's body was more than enough to devastate a child's growing mind, mission notwithstanding.

Ling Lan was very doubtful — was this learning space truly meant to cultivate children, or was it actually meant to destroy a child's future? Thus, she spilled her doubts to Number One.

Number One's expression remained impassive, as he asked in return, "Are you insane?" Implied was the fact that Ling Lan's apparent sanity made her protests moot. If Ling Lan had truly become insane, then she wouldn't have been able to protest anyway...

Ling Lan stared up at the sky, speechless, weeping internally. Hells, she knew better now. As hosts, they had no true power whatsoever — as they grew up, they were subject to the cruel bullying of the learning space, with no room at all to fight back.

Satisfied with Ling Lan's acquiescence, Number One said, "Since you have completed the mission, the learning space will not skimp on your reward."

That said, Ling Lan immediately heard the notification from the learning space's system. "Hunting mission completed, 50 honour points awarded."

Hells, this learning space was so goddamn stingy!

Ling Lan spat in her heart. This proved that her original hypothesis had not been wrong — honour points were indeed difficult to obtain. This extreme mission which had almost driven her insane was only worth 50 points! She couldn't help but rejoice that she had not carelessly wasted those honour points she had received in the beginning.

After the system had rewarded her, Number One did not say anything, only flicking a finger. The environment around them twisted once again, and the endless greenery, the swamp, and the skeletons all faded away, to be replaced by an empty field.

They had once again returned to the learning space where she had learned physical skills from Instructor Number Nine. Looking at the familiar grounds, Ling Lan was struck by how beautiful this scenery before her was for the first time... even though there really was nothing in front of her.

"Time is almost up — you should go back. Remember to contain your malevolent aura..." Without clarifying further, Instructor Number One summarily kicked Ling Lan out of the learning grounds, and in the very next second, Ling Lan had appeared within the great hall of the mind-space.

In a corner, Little Four was seated in a thinking pose. As if sensing something, he lifted his head suddenly, and his eyes filled with joy as he saw Ling Lan. Just as he was about to pounce on her, he suddenly leapt back instead, scurrying to hide behind a large pillar in panic. From there, he peeked out warily, and said, "Boss?"

Little Four's shiftiness irritated Ling Lan. With a flying leap, she had grabbed hold of Little Four's earlobe before he could react.

"Little Four, what are you running away for..." sneered Ling Lan. Although she could do nothing against Instructor Number One, it was a piece of cake for her to handle the rascal Little Four.

"Objection! Objection! You promised me that you would never again use violence on me!" Little Four protested, jumping up and down in rage, and his initial fear fled. Trying to use violence on him — this must be Boss Ling Lan. Just for a moment, he had

mistaken Ling Lan for someone else, a malevolent butcher filled with bloodthirst and killing intent...

With an annoyed huff, Ling Lan released Little Four's ear, asking, "Then why were you acting like you weren't sure who I was? Who else would enter this place?"

Little Four peered intently at Ling Lan, and then said, "Boss, have you not noticed the changes to your body?" As his voice tapered off, a large full-body mirror appeared before them, reflecting both their images faithfully.

Ling Lan lifted her head to look, and immediately understood what Little Four was saying. Now she also understood why Instructor Number One had reminded her to contain her malevolent aura when he left.

The Ling Lan in the mirror was no longer the wide-eyed innocent she had been. Ferocious eyes, killing intent lingering in her gaze, and the faint air of blood-tinged malevolence around her — all indications that this child was a savage wild beast, fully capable of attacking you the very next second if a chance presented itself.

"How did this happen?" Ling Lan rubbed at her face frantically, trying to soften her expression. If she went out looking like this, she would definitely scare the living hells out of her mother. And even if she did not frighten her mother, terrifying the old staff and guards in the family would not end well either.

Under Little Four's assistance, Ling Lan finally managed to reign in the malevolent aura around her. With some effort, she squeezed out a smile, and finally rediscovered the harmless Ling Lan of before. Satisfied, only then did she wave goodbye to Little Four and return to the outside world.

Little Four energetically waved goodbye to Ling Lan, sending her off. When Ling Lan's figure had disappeared completely from his sight, he finally gave up supporting himself and slumped to the ground, wiping away a handful of sweat from his forehead. Even if he was beaten to death, he would never admit to Ling Lan that he had been the one to extend the time period of the illusionary environment to its maximum setting...

Alright, so Ling Lan's forced stay in the primordial forest was not really Instructor Number One's fault, but rather due to Little Four's meddling. It could only be said that it was just Ling Lan's misfortune to have such an imbecilic teammate in Little Four — it was pure luck that she hadn't gone mad.

Back in the real world, due to Ling Lan's previous diligence, she seemed as weak and fragile as ever, appearing without her newly developed malevolent aura, and so garnered no special attention from the people around her. Still, the very next day, Ling Lan submitted a request for actual combat training to Chamberlain Ling Qin.

Naturally, the excuse she used was the final test at the academy, when she had had to fight the examiner. She claimed that — because she had never encountered actual combat before, she did not perform well in the exam and failed to get a higher score, resulting in her 17th spot ranking when entering the Central Scout Academy.

Ling Lan explained that she could not relax now — perhaps when she entered the academy, actual combat would be one of the specialised courses she would have to take, and she didn't want to lose face again. Consequently, she wanted to take the initiative before schooling started to train in actual combat.

In truth, this was an arrangement requested by Instructor Number One to solve the potential problem of her malevolent aura.

Malevolent energy should not be contained forcefully over long periods of time — this would harm Ling Lan's body in the long run, perhaps even affecting her growth. Only when she could control her malevolent aura freely, just like her instructors or other battle-experienced veterans, would the problem be resolved.

Ling Lan's request moved Ling Qin immensely. What elders loved most was to see their beloved juniors show ambition, aiming for success. Without any hesitation, he summoned the best warriors in the Ling household, and charged them as sparring partners for the young master.

In this manner, Ling Lan began her self-torture program in this one month before school started.

In the morning she fought against the Ling family warriors, while at night she was tormented by Instructor Number Nine. At her current level, Ling Lan still hadn't earned the right to be tormented by Number One...

With this continuous cycle of combat every day and night, Ling Lan's tightly contained malevolent aura began to seep out slowly, until she managed to reign it in again, little by little, until it finally disappeared without a trace. In the end, only when Ling Lan had the intent to kill, would her malevolent aura reveal itself.

Due to Number One's timely arrangements, Ling Lan safely passed the time when her secret could be discovered. Meanwhile, only two days were left till the start of school.

Chapter 45

Who Wants to Kill Ling Lan?

On the official first day of school, Ling Lan refused Lan Luofeng's attempts to send her to school, only allowing Chamberlain Ling Qin alone to go with her and register.

It couldn't be helped — Ling Lan's eyelid had been twitching ever since she woke up early in the morning, and although she tried to convince herself not to be superstitious... just in case, for safety reasons, Ling Lan was determined to leave her defenceless mother at home.

Of course, once Ling Lan was seated in the hover car, she began discussing the causes of this physiological response with Little Four, trying to dispel her worry. However, the two of them were like half-empty cans rattling baselessly, neither being able to state anything for certain, and so the discussion could only devolve into confusion.

Looking at the dizzy spirals of confusion that used to be Little Four's eyes, the chagrined Ling Lan decisively ended their fruitless discussion. She summarily concluded that the phenomenon was an unsolvable mystery, which somehow earned her the gullible Little Four's awestruck gaze.

Even as Ling Lan basked in that gaze, she turned away so that Little Four was out of her sight. Hells, it was never her intention to dazzle an underage child with lies.

Just as Ling Lan was trying to dispel the guilt she felt at her deceit, her gaze narrowed and she lifted her head to look out the car window. At the same time, Chamberlain Ling Qin beside her had also sensed the danger, and with a grim expression, he said, "Ling-Zero-Seven, switch into full-body emergency defense mode, and send out a distress signal."

"Yes, orders acknowledged by Ling-Zero-Seven." As the master's designated vehicle, Ling-Zero-Seven was no ordinary hover car.

As Ling-Zero-Seven's voice faded, Ling Lan saw that the transparent areas of the inner car were abruptly covered by another equally transparent defensive layer. Meanwhile, she and Chamberlain Ling Qin had been securely buckled into their seats by safety

belts which had sprung out from the seats. Then, Ling-Zero-Seven's speed kicked up a notch and it flew forward rapidly.

Still, despite Ling-Zero-Seven's new accelerated speed, they still did not manage to dodge the opponent's attack.

A cold glint flashed through Ling Lan's eyes and she gripped the handlebar beside her with both hands.

"Crash!" A huge energy wave flipped the hover car and sent it spinning. Ling-Zero-Seven struggled with all its might to regain control of its unstable body.

"Warning, warning! Body integrity at 71.28%, energy consumption at 22% — we can only withstand the same attack two more times!" reported Ling-Zero-Seven as it finally regained control of its body.

"Ling-Zero-Seven, abandon pre-set route. Implement irregular driving; throw them off as much as you can." Ling Qin's eyes shone with ruthlessness — he would never let these people off for daring to try and harm the hope of the Ling family.

"Yes!" Ling-Zero-Seven diverted from its usual movement style — not only did it increase its speed to 2.2 horsepower, it also began moving in random directions every so often, evading the enemies' long distance attacks again and again.

Inside the car, Ling Qin calmly tugged open a buckle in front of his seat and a large box appeared before Ling Lan. In it was a protective vest, as well as an assortment of weapons.

Already educated in this respect, Ling Lan knew that the weapons in the box included a type-II particle-beam submachine gun, a portable cold fusion gun, two flash grenades, two tear gas grenades, a smoke grenade, and of course, two ultra-lithium alloy short swords for melee combat. In the words of her previous world, the two short swords were so sharp that they could slice through iron as if it were soil, and could split a strand of hair if the wind blew it across their edges.

All these weapons were controlled items by the military, forbidden for civilian use. However, where there's a will, there's a way — people would always find a way to get what they want; moreover, the Ling family was established via military means to begin with, and had countless ties with the military. As such, obtaining these weapons was really not that difficult for them.

Ling Lan saw that there was a similar buckle in front of her, so she pulled on it and an identical box appeared before her.

Ling Qin briefly explained to Ling Lan how they were able to access these weapons so easily, "As long as the emergency defense mode has been activated, these weapon boxes will be unlocked. Under normal circumstances, even if you tried to pry the compartments open, you would never be able to get to the weapons."

Ling Qin instructed Ling Lan to follow his lead and put on the protective vest. Who knew how long the hover car could continue to resist and stay afloat — it was necessary to take all possible precautions and defensive measures as early as possible.

Ling Lan nodded her understanding and quickly put on the vest, and then strapped the two short swords securely to the sides of her legs. After some thought, she also picked up the portable cold fusion gun. Although it wasn't as powerful as the type-II particle-beam submachine gun, it was smaller and lighter, which made it much more suitable for a six year old child like her. Lastly, she took out the two flash grenades and tucked them into the side pockets of her protective vest, leaving the other grenades behind.

The usefulness of a weapon was not decided by its firepower, but by its suitability — Ling Lan had learned this principle well from both her Ling family tutors and the learning space. Seeing her choices, Ling Qin nodded approvingly — Ling Lan had selected only those weapons which suited her. Although the other two grenades were very good for harassing the enemy, since they didn't have the proper protective gear, the grenades wouldn't be of much use to them.

Several miles away, 413's squad, which had chosen to guard Ling Lan from a distance to avoid being spotted by them, were shocked and dismayed by the unexpected attack.

"F*ck. Brothers, charge if you don't want to die!" Piloting his own mecha, 413 rushed swiftly towards the scene. Inside the mecha, his entire face was white — if any harm befell Ling Lan, he would certainly be flayed alive by his demon commander.

All this time, 413's squad had been having a pretty easygoing time of it. Ling Lan wasn't an active and rambunctious child who liked to run about — this made their job very easy, only needing to patrol around the perimeters of the Ling household every

so often.

The six of them pushed their mechas to the max, the sirens on their mechas wailing as they rushed in Ling Lan's direction. As they got closer and closer to the scene...

"Watch out! Scatter!" 413, who was in the lead, felt his hairs stand up, and he rolled to one side with a loud bellow.

Six figures scattered apart as a powerful beam of cold light shot through their original path.

"Number 2, unharmed!"

"Number 3 mecha, right foot frozen."

"Number 4, everything's normal."

"Number 5, lost control of left hand."

"Number 6, no damage."

The five members of the squad immediately reported their status to 413. Only Number 3 and Number 5 had received damage in that last attack.

"Number 4, Number 6 — protect Number 3, Number 5. Number 2, with me against the enemy," ordered 413.

"Yes, Sir!"

Just then, a team of mecha troopers flew in from various angles to convene in front of 413. Their neat standardised mecha, equipped to the teeth with weaponry, betrayed the savage nature of the enemy, causing 413's face to become as dark as a thundercloud.

413 turned on his communication button. "What unit are you from? What is your intention?" This type of standardised mecha and its full set of arms were only available within military channels. The military would never allow this sort of weaponry to fall into civilian hands — meaning that, these people had to have come from the military. And to be able to send out a squad of mecha troopers without alerting anyone, it had to be someone from the upper levels of the military.

So, who in the upper ranks of the military wanted Ling Lan dead? Could it really be the mole concealed within the military?

Still, just for the sake of one small promising seedling... was all this firepower really necessary? Were they not afraid of exposing themselves?

At this point, 413 was still unaware that Ling Lan was Ling Xiao's child. If he knew, then perhaps he would understand why someone would put so much effort into killing Ling Lan.

Chapter 46

Scared?

413's questions met only silence, and then a wave of fire and artillery attacks was headed straight for him and his squad.

"Damn! Activate Beam Shield," bellowed 413. The opponent was clearly trying to kill them all to silence them — it looked like there was no more room for diplomacy.

On the other hand, when the enemy squad saw the mecha of their opponents using advanced beam shields, their leader raged, "Why do the rebel troops have this type of weaponry? Looks like the information was correct — someone in the upper ranks of the military has betrayed the Federation. Focus your fire, and break through those shields! Kill them all — the commander has ordered to take no prisoners."

"Yes, Sir!" Following that, an even more ferocious barrage of long-range fire rained down upon 413's squad, rendering them immobile.

"Sir, what should we do?" asked 413's squad members as they fended off the opponent's attacks with their beam shields. Although they were veterans, butchers who had returned from the battlefield, capable of mercilessly slaughtering enemy troops, they were still reluctant to fight troops from their own country.

"Number 3, contact headquarters. Number 5, cover. The rest of you, attack with me!" 413 ordered without hesitation. Pulling out a beam sword from behind him, he charged towards the enemy.

413 knew very well that the opponent might just be a squad of mecha troopers who had been deceived by their superior, completely ignorant that their mission was a mistake. Still, he could not afford to be merciful. He was responsible for the lives of five subordinates and could not allow them to die because of his hesitation. Furthermore, the opponent intended to kill an innocent child — this was something he would not allow...

Their captain's decisiveness was channelled through to the squad members. The battlefield was no place for hesitation or compassion — only the more ruthless person

would survive.

The mecha trooper squad saw four of the opponent mechas rushing towards them with their beam shields up. Their captain harrumphed and said coldly, "Launch the detonation cables."

Following this order, a fiery dragon shot out from each of the six mechas, converging on the four approaching opponents.

Suddenly, there was the crisp sound of several gun shots and the six dragons exploded instantly. A series of explosions followed soon after as the numerous bombs on the detonating cable were set off. There was a tremendous blast, sending tremors through the earth, as well as cloaking the entire scene in smoke.

Apparently, Number 5, who had been charged with providing cover fire, had deftly used the particle-beam gun on his functional right arm to shoot six clean shots, striking those detonation cables and setting them off, protecting 413 and the others in the process.

His view clouded by smoke, the captain of the opponent mecha squad hesitated. Should he continue to overwhelm the enemy with sheer firepower? However, this short pause was enough for the enemy; a blaring warning went through his mecha's systems, "Danger. Enemy lock-on detected. Evade, evade..."

His first response was to retreat quickly, because he could already see the lead opponent mecha charging out from the smoke, heading fiercely in his direction.

Panicked, he raised the particle-beam gun in his hands, pressing down on the trigger desperately. In this moment, he had completely forgotten how to dodge in his machine, only thinking about how to make the opponent retreat or stop with his attacks.

And then, he saw the opponent suddenly deviate from his straight path, moving instead in a strange radian, skilfully avoiding the dense rain of his particle-beam attacks. His pupils contracting, he shouted in shock, "Freeform evasion! How does he know the most advanced evasion manoeuvre of our military? What the hell is this?" Even as one of the top students at military school, he had yet to learn this skill — why was such a formidable person in the rebel forces?

Heavens, what in the world was happening? It was at this moment that he began to feel that something wasn't right with the situation. But then it was too late.

From his communication systems came the sound of his teammates' terrified screams, but before he could ask them what was happening, his own mecha's display had turned black. No matter how hard he tried to get it to work, pressing the initiate button over and over again, his mecha did not react.

Abruptly he realised, his mecha's movement driver must have been destroyed by the opponent, making him a fish trapped within a jar.

Why did it have to end this way? How could he, an upstanding graduate who excelled in his military studies, lose to these wild mecha operators of the rebel forces? Had the world order been turned upside down? The mecha trooper squad captain slumped in his now useless control seat, face pale with an expression of deep disbelief.

When 413 attacked, he had still shown mercy in the end. He had only destroyed the movement drivers of the mecha, avoiding the pilot carriage and sparing the operator's life. Of course, this was also because the gap in their abilities was distinct, allowing 413 the freedom to choose.

Looking at the six immobile mechas, 413 couldn't help but click his teeth. Hells, thank god these mecha troops were greenhorns who had never seen blood before — otherwise, with their full arsenal against their own simple collection of particle-beam guns and beam swords, the outcome of the battle would have been hard to determine.

At this moment, Number 3, who had successfully contacted headquarters, reported to 413, "Sir, the commander has said to smuggle these people into the Headquarters of the Bladed Forces, and to destroy their mechas completely. Best to let the opponent think that the pilots died along with the machines."

413 nodded, and passed down the order. "Number 3 and Number 5, stay here and carry out the commander's orders. The others, follow me on rescue detail."

"Yes!"

Just like that, 413's squad split into two groups and the four intact mechas sped towards Ling Lan's last known position.

Together with his three team members, 413 flew for a distance with their eyes peeled, but saw no strange disturbances within their range of sight. They couldn't determine Ling Lan's actual position this way.

Helpless, 413 could only order his troops, "Fan out and search. Notify me ASAP if you notice anything odd."

"Yes!" Acknowledging the order, the three mechas behind 413 chose a direction at random and flew off.

413 controlled his own mecha and continued flying forward. He was undoubtedly anxious — because of the scuffle with the troops, they had been delayed for up to 5 minutes. Within those 5 minutes, anything could have happened. He fervently hoped that Ling Lan and whoever he was with could hold on and wait for their rescue.

They really had to find Ling Lan's whereabouts soon, or else everything would be for naught.

Leaving aside 413's frantic search, on Ling Lan's end, they were going through a high-speed chase and were currently in a precarious situation.

While evading, the hover car had been hit once more by the opponent's long-range missiles and had then given out a warning, telling them that the hover car would disassemble in 56 seconds.

Due to the strain of going over its speed limits, the hover car's defensive abilities were already on the brink of collapse, and adding in the damage it received from the attacks, it could hold on no longer.

"Scared?" asked Ling Qin with a smile as he stroked Ling Lan's head. In his other hand, he was already holding a type II particle-beam submachine gun.

"Nope!" replied Ling Lan coolly, as if she were totally unconcerned whether she lived or died. This surprised Ling Qin yet heartened him at the same time — Ling Lan was truly a chip off the old block. Naturally, he had no clue that Ling Lan's apathy towards death was due to her experiences within the illusory primordial forest within the learning space. There, Ling Lan had already learned that fear and terror would not help save her life — only keeping calm would allow her to capitalise on any chance of survival.

"Protect yourself!" Ling Qin patted Ling Lan several more times on the head before lifting his head to look out the window. In a flash, the muscles of his entire body stretched taut as he prepared to go on the attack. Ling Lan did the same, except her actions were much subtler.

Meanwhile, there was now only less than 10 seconds left on Ling-Zero-Seven's countdown...

Chapter 47

The Self-Volunteering Little Four!

Once Ling-Zero-Seven's countdown hit 1, the still speeding hover car came to an abrupt stop. Ling Lan felt as if she would be flung out of the vehicle, but because her seatbelt was very secure, she stayed anchored in her seat.

Soon, Ling Lan sensed the inertia fading, but unexpectedly, her entire body suddenly felt light and the safety belt unbuckled. It turned out that the hover car was beginning to disassemble, breaking into multiple pieces.

"Run!" barked Ling Qin. He braced himself against the hover car for one last moment before being the first to spring out of the vehicle. Ling Qin had already made up his mind — he would set himself up as bait to draw away the surrounding assassins, giving Ling Lan a chance to escape.

Ling Lan followed him out soon after. Amidst the numerous pieces of wreckage from the hover car, she quickly grabbed hold of one of the larger pieces she had set her eyes on immediately. It wasn't too large or too small, just right for sheltering her small body, and it was also flying off towards a landing point which suited her.

Like a lizard, Ling Lan clung to the piece of debris, and under the cover of the other debris flying around, she flipped herself nimbly in mid-air to hide behind the debris and reined in her presence. She then let the debris fly as it would until it fell with her positioned below it onto an empty plot of ground with no cover in sight.

At the moment she landed, Ling Lan circulated her Qi throughout her body, filling her limbs and torso with energy as she crashed into the ground. Unknown to outside observers, a large ditch had been carved into the ground under the piece of debris she was holding onto, with Ling Lan fully ensconced within it. Naturally, the piece of debris was flat against the ground above her — no one would suspect a person could be hiding under that debris.

Ling Lan chose to hide in this manner because it took advantage of people's general assumptions and blind spots — in this flat open ground with no place to hide, her hiding place would be easily overlooked, since the natural tendency was to focus on

the surrounding shrubs and tufts of wild grass where people were more likely to hide.

Of course, Ling Lan wasn't hiding here for safety reasons — she intended to counterattack. Once everyone's attention was further ahead, her position would be right behind the attackers, where she would have a chance to deal a killing blow from their neglected backs.

Ling Lan had no choice but to take this risk. The opponent had chosen their ambush spot too well, where the protection from the cities were the thinnest. From the Ling household to the Central Scout Academy, Ling Lan's group had always travelled through bustling cities, and it was only during this particular half-hour stretch that they would pass through uninhabited land. In this stretch, there were only woods or deserted plains, with hardly any people about — the only living creatures being wild beasts and fowl.

By setting up their ambush here, the opponents ensured that by the time the cities on both ends received their distress signal and sent out rescue forces, the earliest possible time for reinforcements to arrive would be 15 minutes. Ling Lan believed that these people were fully capable of killing her multiple times over within these 15 minutes. She also believed that if the opponent couldn't find any trace of her in the surroundings, they would take a scorched-earth approach and do a thorough sweep, perhaps even digging three feet into the ground. When that time came, even if she was hiding in a blind spot, she would still be forced out from her hiding place. She could not take this gamble.

Most importantly, she could not be sure that Chamberlain Ling Qin could hold on for 15 minutes under these circumstances. If she didn't make a move, it was likely that she would see a loved one die for the first time since coming to this future world, which was something she really didn't want to gamble on.

Soon enough, three hover cars flew over. However, the opponent was very cautious, not driving right up to the main site. Instead, they landed about 30 metres away from where Ling Lan was hiding.

Two of the hover cars opened up and eight stout men walked out. The eight of them were fully armoured, with protective helmets on their heads and protective suits on their bodies, and particle-beam submachine guns in their hands. These were all standard equipment, common in both the military and even private personal armouries. Looks like the opponent was cautious in this aspect as well — anything

that could reveal their identity had been excluded.

The eight men crept closer, carefully, leaving behind that lone hover car with its doors shut. That car had two plasma cannons raised high above it, covering the men's approach, ready to fire at any sign of resistance.

Obviously, these three hover cars had been privately modified to become combat-suited hover cars, and Ling Lan noticed that there was no Federation-mandated registration number on any of the cars. The opponent was certainly well-prepared.

Ling Lan did not raise her head at all, yet she knew the current situation as well as the back of her hand. Having Little Four meant that she could be aware of what was happening within the radius of a thousand metres even with her eyes closed. In this way, she knew that much farther away from the hover cars here, at a location not visible from this position, there were two humanoid mechas aiming long-range sniper rifles in this direction. The opponent was really determined to kill them.

Calmly, Ling Lan calculated the success rate of several possible attacks within her mind. However, all the scenarios that she had considered in her mind up till now had a success rate of zero. Still, Ling Lan wasn't discouraged — her time in the primordial forest and her survival training there had engraved this lesson into her: be calm even if you were about to die, for a chance would often appear at the most improbable moment.

For just the possibility of survival, she would have to first solve the problem of the predatory hover car. The two plasma cannons were just too great a threat, although the two humanoid mechas in the distance were also a huge headache... Ling Lan decided to just focus on the problem right before her for now.

That said, the weapons she had on her now were just not enough for her to get rid of that armoured hover car, not to mention the professional assassins contained within it. With Ling Lan's current small frame, it might still be possible for her to handle one person, but if she had to fight two, then she would pretty much be like a lamb to the slaughter.

What should she do?

"Tch, at this crucial moment, why did you forget me?" In her mind, Little Four, who had been waiting for Ling Lan to call for help all this time, suddenly made his protest heard.

"Huh? How many people can you handle?" Ling Lan was startled and rather confused — she herself could not take on two at one time, what could Little Four do as a mental presence without a body?

"Well, I can't do anything about the humans, but I can handle cars..." said Little Four resentfully. Why was his boss so stupid? Humans weren't computers which he could hack.

Little Four's words enlightened Ling Lan — she had indeed got caught up in thinking within a box. Modern hover cars were all controlled by artificial intelligences, while Little Four was the natural enemy of anything digital. As long as he was given a chance, Little Four could definitely wrest control of the hover cars, which would prevent the car's weapons from firing...

"From this distance, can you do it?" Ling Lan couldn't help asking once out of worry.

"Even 10 metres further would be fine... if your spiritual power were just a bit higher, I'd be able to do it from even further away," replied Little Four with some disdain in his tone, as if looking down on Ling Lan for limiting his range.

Ling Lan bit out in annoyance, *"Just do it. If I kick the bucket here, you'll also die..."*

Little Four shuddered — how did he forget that? He did not dare to kid around anymore, immediately borrowing some of Ling Lan's spiritual power to start infiltrating the hover car.

By this time, the eight men had already passed by Ling Lan's hiding place. After all, there was nothing on this plot of land other than several pieces of debris of varying sizes lying flat against the ground, no place at all for someone to hide. Very naturally, they eliminated this area from their consideration, moving steadily towards the surrounding shrubs up ahead. Clearly, that was a much more likely hiding place.

As the men got closer and closer to the shrubs, Ling Lan's heart started thumping anxiously... because that was exactly where Chamberlain Ling Qin was hiding.

Chapter 48

The Psychotic Grandpa Chamberlain!

A soft "Pop!" was heard and a smoke grenade flew out from among the shrubs. Triggered, the eight men shot wildly at the grenade — their marksmanship was excellent; almost every single shot hit the grenade. However, smoke grenades were unlike other grenades which would explode or become ineffective when struck. It continued to release smoke, and the more it was hit, the faster it released smoke, and soon the entire area surrounding the shrubs was shrouded in a thick cloud of smoke. Although the protective helmets of the men were able to insulate against the smoke to a certain extent, their vision was still affected.

Still, the eight men were professional killers after all. They did not panic, firing their particle-beam submachine guns instead without hesitation. Countless particle beams shot out, turning the short shrubs into a pile of ash.

Ling Lan was not at all worried however, as she had seen Chamberlain Ling Qin rush into the bushes on his right at the same time he had thrown out the smoke grenade.

But Ling Qin's next actions thoroughly stunned Ling Lan — he untied a thin rope which was coiled around his wrist, and with a quick pinch on one end, the initially solid rope split into countless strands which were as thin as hair.

Holding onto one end, Ling Qin swiftly tied it onto the trigger of the type II particle-beam gun, and then set up the gun within the bushes. Under the sound of gunfire, he snuck away once again to a new hiding place. Ling Lan could clearly see that he still held the almost invisible thin strands of the decomposed rope in his hands.

After a round of fire, the eight men saw that the short shrubs had been reduced to cinders. With a quick exchange of glances and some hand signals, two of the men stepped forward. It looked like they wanted to examine the ashes of the shrubs to see if there was any sign of their target there — of course, any remains would do as well.

The two men crept forward, and used the tip of their particle-beam guns to sift through the ashes. And right then, gunfire rang out from the right and a wave of particle beams cascaded out. The hidden Ling Qin had pulled on the strands within

his hands, setting off the type II gun within the bushes.

The type II gun ruthlessly expelled particle beams with an intensity that was way stronger than the opponent's own particle beam guns — as expected of the newest version of the particle-beam submachine gun.

This attack was aimed at the six men providing cover — one of the men could not react in time and was mercilessly shot down. The others, including the two checking the burnt shrubs, were quick to react, directing all their gunfire at the bushes from where the shots originated. They shot unrestrainedly, and one of them finally managed to hit the type II gun lodged within the bushes, detonating it and turning the bushes into a sea of fire.

Seeing this, the seven men stopped their attack, and their tightly strung nerves relaxed. They were certain that since the type II gun had exploded, then the shooter holding it would certainly have been caught in the blast. Besides, with this huge fire, even if the shooter didn't die in the blast, he would still be roasted alive and turned into ash.

But right at this moment, something unexpected occurred. Ling Qin flew towards them from one side as he launched a Ling family signal flare into the sky.

It was alright if he died, but Ling Lan must survive. Ling Qin's purpose in attacking was primarily to draw all their attention, including the attention of the hover car in the background — he hoped Ling Lan would take the chance to escape while they were preoccupied with him. Moreover, he believed that the Ling family loyalists were already on the way to meet up with them — with the Ling family's strength, handling these killers would be no big deal.

The blazing signal flare hung high in the sky, surprising several groups of people who were frantically searching for Ling Lan. Exhilarated, they turned towards the direction of the flare and started rushing there at full speed.

Ling Qin's attack was too sudden and unexpected. Only the man in the lead had enough time to react, shooting particle beams desperately to try and fend off Ling Qin's attack, while the other six just stood there dumbly.

Quicker than words could say, Ling Qin's sprinting figure suddenly wavered, and then the leader's particle beams were behind him.

The leader exclaimed in shock, "Irregular flicker!" This was a high level evasive move that was extremely hard to apply well in combat. Typically, anyone who could use this move in combat was certain to be a master fighter.

A cold smile hung on Ling Qin's lips. At this moment, he had already gotten close to the assassin closest to him.

"Quickly fire the plasma cannons!" The team leader's gaze was fierce, holding a vicious determination within it. He shouted loudly through the communicator, retreating swiftly at the same time.

In truth, the men had disembarked mainly as bait to tempt the opponent to attack — the true killing blow was always meant to be the hover car behind them. Of course, for these people who were used to operating from the shadows, sacrificing a few subordinates was perfectly normal, which was why the team leader had given up on his subordinate who was being attacked by Ling Qin without any hesitation whatsoever.

The team leader had already readied himself to dodge, but the hover car behind them did not react as expected and fire its cannons. Instead, it just maintained its original position, along with radio silence.

Before he could turn back to face the front, he heard a pained scream. The subordinate whom he had ruthlessly abandoned had already been pierced through the throat with a dagger by Ling Qin, and had emitted one final chilling cry. The cry seemed to reverberate with rage and despair — after all, he had seen with his own eyes how his team leader had abandoned him right before he died.

Ling Qin's expression was one of aloof disinterest. His face had been spattered with bright crimson drops of blood, and the cloying scent of blood filled the air, thick enough to cause an average person to vomit. However, Ling Qin seemed perfectly at ease, going so far as to even daintily lick at the blood on the corner of his lips — what a psychotic Grandpa Chamberlain! Ling Lan couldn't help but wail in her heart at the sight. What was up with all these people around her...?!

At the taste of blood, Ling Qin's expression turned obsessed, almost intoxicated — he hadn't experienced this bloody taste in so long!

Two orbs of nameless fire ignited within his eyes. In his youth, he had been the one to

crawl through piles of corpses on the battlefield with Ling Xiao's father — this sort of carnage was normal for him then. Sadly, after Ling Xiao had been promoted to god-class, their bloody reign of terror was thoroughly shoved into the past. It wasn't that Ling Qin wanted to wash his hands of killing, but god-class operators were the symbol of ultimate strength within the Federation, so no one wanted to risk the wrath of a god-class operator.

Ling Qin had thought that the many years of meditation and easy living had caused him to forget his initial savage nature. Unexpectedly, facing battle once again today, his blood still boiled and killing came back to him as easy as breathing. This pleased him greatly, and it felt like the savage beast within him had finally been set free after all this time.

Ling Qin laughed maniacally — looks like killing was still something he revelled in after all.

Observing all this, Ling Lan silently wiped away a handful of cold sweat. Who knew that the strict and serious Grandpa Chamberlain who treated her so kindly was such a vicious character? The way that he killed was almost textbook material, and that chilling smile would make anyone think twice about crossing him.

Ling Lan felt her little heart thunder wildly... Hells, she must never anger Grandpa Chamberlain in the future! Ling Lan decisively labelled Chamberlain Ling Qin as 'a person not to mess with'.

When Ling Qin launched his attack, he had not considered surviving to begin with. So he didn't stop after killing the first enemy, but instead launched himself at the next person in line.

There was a clear gap between the combat ability of the two sides — despite his age, Ling Qin was strong, and his combat prowess was not much weaker than when he was young. By the time Ling Qin had disposed of his third opponent, the team leader could be heard yelling furiously into his communicator, "You bastard, I told you to shoot! Shoot goddammit..."

It turned out that the team leader still hadn't given up on the hover car. As Ling Qin prepared to kill yet another two people, the team leader was still desperately trying to contact the hover car to order them to shoot, but obviously, all he received in return was silence, and this silence was pushing him towards the brink of despair.

Finally, he understood that their finishing move – the hover car – must have been taken out somehow and could no longer be relied on. Enraged, he threw away the communicator in his hands and lifted up his weapon, shouting, "Attack!"

Chapter 49

The Threat of Long-Range Attacks

A cold smile graced Ling Qin's lips. If the opponent had attacked him as a group from the start, he might already be a horizontal corpse lying on the ground. But now, besides the one man who had been gunned down by the type II submachine gun, he had successfully ended the lives of three men with his own hands. It was no longer that easy for the remaining four people to hold him back.

In all honesty, Ling Qin was very surprised himself — why was the hover car not reacting? The reason he had attacked so furiously was that he wanted to eliminate as many opponents as possible before he was taken out by the hover car, so that Ling Lan would have a greater chance of escape.

Regardless, Ling Qin was very pleased with the current situation. It was clear that something had gone wrong on his opponents' end, and this was extremely advantageous for him. From the certainty of death to the renewed hope for survival, Ling Qin's attacks only became fiercer and more powerful.

If living was an option, would anyone choose to die? Ling Qin also wanted to live — he wanted to watch Ling Lan grow up, get married, and have kids. He still dreamed of the day he could hold Ling Lan's children in his arms. For this objective, Ling Qin dug out all the inner potential he could from within his body.

Ling Qin weaved left and right, nimbly avoiding all of the opponent's wild shots. He used the irregular flicker to its ultimate effect, leaving Ling Lan astounded as she watched. She decided then that if both Chamberlain Ling Qin and her survived this, then she must get Grandpa Chamberlain to teach her this move — it was just too goddamn beautiful.

Evasion aside, Ling Qin's lethal attacks became even more unpredictable. His dagger flew through the air gracefully like he was dancing, and the mysterious rope being controlled by the fingers of his left hand was even more terrifying.

Every single time the men saw the fingers of his left hand twitch, they couldn't help but back away. The men really couldn't be blamed for being fearful — out of the three

men Ling Qin had killed, two had died because of this thin rope. They hadn't been observant enough and had let the rope loop around their necks, and with just a quick twist, their heads had been severed from their necks, blood spewing everywhere. That just went to show how sharp that rope truly was, and combined with how hard it was to see – appearing and disappearing without any warning – how could they not fear it?

Ling Lan watched it with greedy eyes. This was undoubtedly a most subtle killing tool. Who knew that such an unassuming thin rope looped around Ling Qin's wrist would be so terrifying? Ling Lan decided that she must ask about the origins of this rope later, and if possible, she wanted one of her own.

Today's experience taught her that the world she was living in was truly dangerous. She needed to work much harder to improve her own capabilities and diversify the weapons and tools she could use — both were equally important.

Still, although Ling Qin's feat in killing three of the men could partly be attributed to his strange choice of weapon and his own individual strength, a large part was still due to sheer luck. Certainly, the first person he killed was a result of his careful planning, but the following two were just opportunities presented through the opponent's own mistakes.

If the team leader had not moved to abandon his own team member, the other members wouldn't have been so afraid of becoming the next sacrifice, all choosing to withdraw to protect themselves instead of focusing on attacking. In that case, then Ling Qin wouldn't have been able to kill two more men in the chaos, turning the tables around.

All that can be said was that the opponent's team had an idiot in it — and most unfortunately, this idiot was the team leader with the authority to decide whether they lived or died.

Luckily, this idiot was not an idiot to the extreme, deciding to change his orders in time. The remaining four men quickly arranged themselves into the formation of an inverted trapezoid, cooperating with each other to coordinate their attacks and defense as they faced the aggressive Ling Qin who was rushing towards his fourth intended victim.

The tips of four particle-beam guns lit up, spewing out countless particle beams in

Ling Qin's direction, blinding the eyes of all observers, including the two mecha pilots closely watching the proceedings here.

"Head, why don't those idiots fire the cannons?" One of the mecha pilots wondered out loud. He rubbed at his blurry eyes — the display screen on the mecha relayed what was happening live, so his eyes would get tired from staring at it for too long

He really just couldn't understand it — there had clearly been several really great opportunities to launch those cannons, but the men had just let those opportunities slip by, while the hover car just continued to hover there uselessly.

The mecha operator called Head replied, "Who knows? All we need to do is do clean up. Only if those people fail, then it'll be up to us."

"But the opponent has already sent out a signal flare — reinforcements are sure to be on the way. If we don't resolve this matter soon, we may be discovered by the people heading here. Head, didn't you say that the superiors don't want our involvement to be revealed?"

"That's right. If the superiors find out they botched this, we won't have a good time of it either. Oh, what the heck, let's just do it. I'll leave that annoying flea jumping around to you — make sure to get a headshot in one shot." After being reminded of the consequences by his subordinate, the operator called Head abruptly changed his mind and ordered his subordinate to eliminate Ling Qin quickly.

"Got it, Head. Watch me as I take the stage." Finally, it was time for him to show off his skills. The mecha operator who had waited for so long was ecstatic. He controlled his mecha to swing about the huge long-range sniper rifle on its right shoulder, and then the 4-metre high mecha bent into a half kneeling position. Its metal left arm steadied the rifle, which had its sight aimed at the busily evading Ling Qin.

The mecha's movements did not escape Ling Lan's notice. Ever since Chamberlain Ling Qin had begun fighting head on with those men, Ling Lan had been keeping an eye on the two mechas, wary of a sudden attack. Now, seeing one of the mechas getting ready to shoot long-range, she knew they were about to attack Grandpa Chamberlain, but she was not worried.

Within this time, while Chamberlain Ling Qin had been fighting for his life, she had not been idle. After much calculation and strategizing, she had finally found a way to

handle the two mechas. It may not be the best plan, but it was good enough to hinder and delay them.

"Little Four, raise a hover car! And then calculate the trajectory of mecha A's attack." Ling Lan had randomly labelled the two mechas as mecha A and mecha B for ease of reference when communicating with Little Four.

Following Ling Lan's order, one of the unmanned hover cars suddenly rose up from the ground, and not even a second later, it was hovering 2 metres above the ground. Meanwhile, in front of Ling Lan, a map of mecha A's attack trajectory had appeared, with coordinates and height clearly labelled on it.

"Move the hover car here," said Ling Lan decisively, pointing at a point nearest to the hover car.

Before her words had faded, the hover car had already shifted into position under Little Four's control.

"F*ck, what the hell? Actually blocking my line of attack." Resentfully, mecha A put down his sniper rifle. The operator was extremely displeased — that had been a prime opportunity to shoot, but it had been ruined by that errant hover car.

That was probably unintentional, it just happened to move there." Mecha B also didn't know what was going on, but he still didn't hesitate to console mecha A, saying, "Don't mind it. Let me try this time."

That said, mecha B started adjusting his own rifle's angle, aiming at Ling Qin who was still deep in battle with the four men. As for whether his shot would hit any of the men on the ground in the process — that was none of his concern.

Chapter 50

Fighting For Time!

"Little Four, mecha B's attack trajectories," requested Ling Lan calmly, *"and raise the second hover car."* The more dangerous the situation, the more she needed to stay calm — Chamberlain Ling Qin's life depended on her.

Ling Lan was endlessly grateful that she had the help of such a useful companion like Little Four. After Little Four had taken control of the threatening hover car, he had also notified Ling Lan that he had assumed control of the other two hover cars as well. This information was like a ray of light to the perturbed Ling Lan, giving her the precious inklings of an idea which might help Ling Qin and her hold on till backup arrived.

Yet along with her relief, she also felt quite glum. For the first time ever, she truly recognised how weak she was still. Currently, she could only watch as a loved one she cared for fought for his life — if it weren't for Little Four, Grandpa Ling Qin would probably be bleeding all over the scene by now.

As of this moment, Ling Lan did not notice that an intense need to grow stronger had taken seed and sprouted within her heart, and had started to grow secure roots. In the future, when she encountered difficulties and felt tired or lost, it would give her the will to carry on...

Little Four's actions were impeccable — not only did he manage to calculate and present all of mecha B's attack trajectories, he had also automatically shifted the second hover car to block off those trajectories.

Little Four was a studious child — Ling Lan only had to order him once for him to remember her instructions. Thus, without needing to be told twice, he had already taken the initiative to do what Ling Lan wanted.

"Little Four, well done." Even though she had never raised a child before, Ling Lan still knew that children loved to be praised. So, she was unstinting with her praise, causing Little Four to blush bright red, smiling so much till his eyes were all scrunched up into a line.

When the hover cars once again interfered with the attack trajectories, even a dumber person would have noticed that something wasn't right.

"Not good! Something must have gone wrong." Mecha B lowered his rifle, expression serious.

"Head, I remember that the people in those hover cars are all out. There's no one in those cars." Mecha A had also figured out the truth, remembering that the people who had initially been in those cars were now embroiled in battle with the opponent.

"Not good, we've been discovered." Thinking about how their attacks were being thwarted, mecha B felt cold sweat start pouring out from his pores. His every move was most likely already being monitored by the opponent.

"Ah... H-Head, what should we do?" Mecha A began panicking. If their identities had truly been exposed, then they would not be allowed to live. Although he didn't know who their direct superior was, from the little that he had gleaned from Head's explanations, he knew that it was someone who had the power to move mountains and part oceans. Eliminating them would be like squishing ants to someone like that.

"Shoot down those two hover cars," bit out mecha B ruthlessly. If they pulled back now, they still wouldn't be welcomed back; they might as well take a gamble, and perhaps achieve something that might work in their favour.

"Alright, Head." Mecha A was too afraid not to listen. He once again lifted his sniper rifle to aim at one of the hover cars.

"Little Four, come back quick." Ling Lan saw the opponent raise his rifle and just knew that they weren't about to just roll over. She was worried for Little Four's safety, and so quickly urged him to come back.

Of course, Ling Lan felt a little regretful — she had actually intended to send a warning to the opponent with the hover cars, letting them know that they were being monitored, and hope that they'd choose to retreat out of wariness. Unexpectedly, the plan didn't work; looks like the opponent was a relentless character, who would fight till the very end.

In that case, come on then! Ling Lan clenched her fists, determination writ all over her face. *"Little Four, move the last hover car into a position which can block the attacks of both mechas."*

Before Ling Lan's words had faded, two loud collisions could be heard:

"Boom!""Boom!"

The two sounds were almost simultaneous. As expected, the opponent had pressed on their triggers, hitting the two hover cars at the front. However, these hover cars had been modified and were extremely solid — although there was a huge gouge in the car's body as a result from the rifle shot, where one side had even bent inwards, the internal circuitry was still intact, so the hover car was still able to stay airborne.

"That's great, these modified cars are really pretty solid." Ling Lan looked at the hover cars still holding on in the air, protecting Ling Qin, and her heart rejoiced. At first, she had still been worried that the hover cars would not be strong enough, that they would be destroyed in one hit, but now it looked like they would still be able to buy them some time.

Considering the time when Chamberlain Ling Qin had released the signal flare, Ling Lan knew that if they could just hold on for another three to four minutes, assistance might make it here.

Hover cars, you need to stay strong and hold on... Ling Lan couldn't help but pray.

"F*ck, who made these hover cars to be so solid?" mecha B couldn't resist swearing. He turned his head and continued to order, "Don't slack off, continue to shoot. We must bring down those cars as soon as possible."

"Yes, Head!" replied mecha A as he pressed down on his trigger furiously.

Boom! Boom! Boom! The sniper rifles shot round after round, and on one particular round, a crack finally appeared on one of the hover cars, and continued to spread until the car was a broken mess...

BOOM! One of the hover cars was hit once more, and this time, it finally gave up the ghost and became a flaming fireball, blazing brightly as it fell to the ground.

In swift succession, the other hover car took another couple of hits and exploded as well, joining its partner in a fiery death on the ground below.

"Hells, why is there another car? When did it move there?" Mecha B finally managed to eliminate the hover cars blocking his line of sight, but just as he was about to relax and start aiming for Ling Qin, he found that he could no longer see Ling Qin once more. And the reason was another hover car that had appeared near Ling Qin.

And unlike the first two which were empty, this car had people in it. The people inside looked at the other two hover cars which had been shot down in flames, and understood what their fate would be as well. In panic, they beat at the doors and windows of the car, but unfortunately, the doors and windows of the hover car had already been sealed up tight by Little Four. There was no way they could get them to open.

Naturally, they had thought about smashing the windows open, but unfortunately the cars had been too thoroughly modified — even the enhanced sniper rifles on the mechas could only destroy the cars after over ten hits, what could they do with only their fists?

Meanwhile, as this was happening, Ling Qin had killed off another two men, leaving only one squad member and the team leader hiding right at the back.

Ling Lan was very nervous. She hoped that this final hover car would be able to withstand the remaining attacks until Chamberlain Ling Qin managed to get rid of the final two men. At that time, even if there was nothing else to block the mechas' trajectory, Ling Qin should be able to utilise the geographical features of the land to find somewhere else to hide, such as another group of shrubs.

Suddenly, the hover car reversed, and its two plasma cannons fired, and the plasma beams rose swiftly through the air.

Ling Lan was greatly startled by this. *"Little Four, what's going on?!"*

Little Four replied instantly, *"Hehe, I didn't waste any time just now, and finally figured out the artificial intelligence systems of this world. I had not expected you humans to have managed to use this sort of mathematical means to create artificial intelligences which resemble us — of course, this resemblance is minor though, since those A.I.s are still worlds apart from us..."* Little Four was very smug, a proud smirk on his face as he

praised his own individuality.

A vein popped out on Ling Lan's forehead, and she raged, "*Get to the point!*" Hells, does this brat know what kind of situation they were in? Wasting time blabbering on...

"I've designed two small artificial systems, and have already implanted them onto the navigation system of the plasma cannons." Little Four pouted, throwing out these words sulkily before turning to face away from Ling Lan. Fine, looks like this rascal child had gotten into another of his moods again.

Chapter 51

Super Homing Projectiles?

Ling Lan was not oblivious to Little Four's little tantrum, but her attention was entirely absorbed by Little Four's words. Those plasma bolts had been launched in the direction of the two mechas, but the range of plasma cannons were notably short, meaning that it was highly unlikely for those missiles to hit the mechas, unless...

It wasn't that Ling Lan hadn't considered using the plasma cannons on the hover car, but the information she had obtained from Little Four regarding the plasma cannons had dissuaded her. Plasma cannons had both a distinct advantage and a distinct disadvantage — typically, its disadvantage could be ignored as long as its advantage was utilised to its maximum effect.

Unfortunately, Ling Lan couldn't do that right now. The plasma cannon's advantage was its high attack power, and the likelihood of its projectiles exploding upon impact. This meant that it would cause a certain amount of area-of-effect damage, having a high destructive power against its surroundings. Ling Lan didn't dare to fire the plasma cannons to help Chamberlain Ling Qin kill the assassins because she was afraid that any mistake may end up in tragedy — where she accidentally killed Ling Qin instead of the assassins.

Of course, she had also considered using the cannons to deal with the two mechas in the distance — but the disadvantage of the plasma cannon was its short range. It was likely that the bolts would only fly half the distance before running out of speed and falling to the ground to explode harmlessly.

These two characteristics of the plasma cannons tied Ling Lan's hands. Though of course Ling Lan was already mentally prepared to let Little Four fire the cannons anyway if Chamberlain Ling Qin's life was truly threatened by the assassins.

By now, Ling Lan had gotten a vague sense of what Little Four had been trying to say. She believed that Little Four wouldn't do something pointless — since he had dared to fire the plasma cannons, he must have found a way to overcome its weakness. Perhaps those two minor A.I.s he had mentioned would bring about some effect to solve the problem... If that was so, then Little Four was truly brilliant. Ling Lan's spirits

soared.

Little Four clearly sensed the change in Ling Lan's thoughts, and although he still had his back to Ling Lan, his butt started wriggling around, as if delighted by Ling Lan's newfound cheer.

Ling Lan noticed Little Four's reaction, and knew that she must have guessed correctly. As such, she quickly praised, *"Little Four, you're really the best Little Four."*

After spending so many years with Little Four, Ling Lan had already become familiar with all his quirks, and knew very well how much he loved praise. With just this simple phrase, she managed to make Little Four so happy that his eyes twinkled, completely forgetting that he had just been angry at Ling Lan.

Little Four pranced back to Ling Lan's side, patting his little chest as he said confidently, *"Relax, Boss, leave the two mecha to me. Hehe, there are still two shots in the plasma cannons — let me immediately install this little A.I. to affect them as well. That way, even if the attack this time is avoided, we can still continue attacking."*

Little Four's words slightly reassured Ling Lan. As long as they could distract the two mechas, Chamberlain Ling Qin would have even more time to handle those assassins, greatly raising the odds of his safety.

Still, Ling Lan cautioned Little Four not to fire those last two plasma bolts unless absolutely necessary — at times, the threat of an attack was much more valuable than an actual attack.

Ling Lan knew very well that although plasma bolts had a lot of destructive power, that was only against people with basic protective gear. Against those mechas which were composed from super titanium alloys, unless the missiles hit a defensive weak point, such as the mecha's cockpit (though the plasma bolts would still not be able to breach the cockpit, its attack would shake the surroundings violently, possibly harming the pilot within it), they would be rather ineffective.

On the opponent's side, as Ling Lan expected, mecha A and mecha B had not given up. They wasted no time in preparing to shoot down that final hover car. To their surprise however, before they could fire their own sniper rifles, the hover car had turned towards them and launched its own plasma cannons in their direction.

Mecha A couldn't hide the scorn in his voice as he mocked, "Tsk, does he really think

he'll hit us with that?"

Within the Federation, aside from greenhorns, everyone else knew the characteristics of plasma cannons. Firepower was its advantage, while range was its fatal flaw. The only reasons it hadn't been dismissed completely by the Federation were that its production cost was cheap and that it was still viable in a close-range battle, leading it to remain as one of the staple weapons of the federal military.

That said, plasma cannons were only a real threat to normal soldiers. They were really ineffective against mecha operators like them — even if they were hit, besides the possibility of being pushed around a bit by the shockwave, the missiles would do nothing to them.

Mecha B thought the same as mecha A, dismissive of the harm the plasma bolts could do to them. The bolts might not even hit them to begin with! Impatiently, he said, "Ignore those two junks, just focus on shooting down that hover car. We don't have much time left." By his estimations, they only had two minutes left at most — they had no more time to waste.

"Yes!" Mecha A didn't dare to say anything more, putting all his focus into pulling on his trigger to attack that bothersome hover car.

But he hadn't managed to shoot that many times when he heard his mecha's systems issuing a strong warning, "Caution! Caution! Attack detected, we have been targeted! Impact in 9, 8, 7..."

On the screen, a lighted dot representing the attack source was closing the distance fast and looked like it was about to hit them very soon.

"F*ck!" Mecha A only had time to curse briefly, before having to move his mecha into evasion manoeuvres. At the same time, mecha B had also started busily dodging.

"Isn't it just a plasma cannon? What the hell is going on?" As mecha B dodged, the attack source drew closer, and he could clearly see from his screen that the attacks were the two plasma bolts they had dismissed earlier. Of course, one of the bolts was targeting him.

Mecha A completed an almost perfect 90 degree turn, thinking that he would be able to evade the bolt completely by doing so. However, he immediately found that the bolt actually turned with him, causing him to shout out in alarm, "It's following me!"

Goddammit, what the hell is this?!"

Did plasma bolts have this tracking ability? And was their range this long? Mecha A felt his world view tilting on its axis — how could such an unbelievable thing happen?

Mecha B naturally noticed this as well. His evasion movements were even more extravagant than mecha A's, even involving irregular flash evasion (a lower level version of freeform flash evasion). Logically, he should have been able to dodge any number of plasma bolts this way. But now, no matter how he dodged, that one plasma bolt dogged his every move, unlike regular plasma bolts which would have fallen to the ground and exploded by now.

"These are definitely not regular plasma bolts!" The experienced mecha B concluded. "These must be modified homing projectiles — make sure you don't get hit by them, or else you'll be dead!"

Mecha B decisively identified the projectiles as homing projectiles that had been modified to look like plasma bolts. Despite appearances, they were sure to be the much more expensive and powerful super homing projectiles which were a nightmare to low level mecha pilots.

Super homing projectiles were a type of artillery which had high destructive power and was equipped with tracking ability. Its power was not something a minor plasma bolt could compare with — if it hit, a normal standardized mecha would most likely be smashed into a pulp, although some higher level mechas might still be able to withstand its attacks.

It had been feared by mecha pilots everywhere ever since it was first created, and was now considered one of the most troublesome artillery by mecha pilots. Another nickname it had was 'newbie killer'.

This was because the homing projectiles had very formidable tracking — once it locked onto a target, it was useless no matter how the mecha operator tried to outmanoeuvre it. Of course, this was with the exception of high level operators who could pull off highly advanced manoeuvres which utilised the operator's surroundings, causing the missile to blow up by hitting something else. However, this skill was not something the average mecha operator could handle, and so the homing projectile was considered one of the most hated weaponry among the low level mecha pilots. Many newbies often had their wings clipped because of this projectile, which

was how it had gained its nickname.

Thus, when mecha A and mecha B began suspecting that these bolts after them could be homing projectiles, they no longer had any thought to spare for the hover cars. Now, they only had one goal — find a way to dodge these tracking missiles stuck to them.

There was no helping it — if it was before, they wouldn't have been so concerned. This time, in order to hide their identity, they had been given common standardised mecha to operate, which were incapable of withstanding a hit from a homing projectile.

On Ling Lan's side, she watched in puzzlement as the two mechas jumped around dramatically to avoid the plasma bolts. After all, even if the bolts hit, as long as they didn't hit the cockpit, the effect would be negligible — why were those two mechas so flustered?

Ling Lan had no idea that Little Four's modifications had inadvertently caused the opponent to mistake the bolts for the terrifying homing projectiles, causing them to react accordingly out of caution. It should be said that the heavens were truly watching over Ling Lan, helping her to resolve her greatest threat at this crucial moment.

"Yay!" Watching how his modified plasma bolts were forcing the two mechas to run around in circles, Little Four raised his hand up in a victory pose.

There was a hint of a smile on Ling Lan's lips, and she was no longer as tense as before. She had become much more relaxed since the most pressing problem had been resolved. *"Little Four, this time it's all thanks to you."* Ling Lan's thanks was heartfelt — if it weren't for Little Four, Chamberlain Ling Qin might have been in real danger. And now, Chamberlain Ling Qin had even more time to make sure he could finish off the final two opponents before him.

"Boss, why are you thanking me? Aren't I your follower? It's a follower's duty to help their boss." Little Four was puzzled. Didn't the novel he read say that it was the unquestionable duty of a follower to back up his boss in all things, no matter if it was to take the fall for a crime or just to help relieve their worries?

Additionally, he found that he loved the intensity of battle. Looking at the bolts he reprogrammed chase the opponent's mechas all over the place, his mood was exceptionally well. Little Four had the vague feeling that he was born to do this — although he hadn't been unhappy helping Ling Lan to earn money in the past few

years, the present intensity here truly made his blood boil.

Right then and there, Little Four made a decision. In future, he must look for more opportunities for his boss to encounter battle. Dammit, it was just too exhilarating.

Chapter 52

A Genius among Geniuses!

At this moment, Ling Lan would never have guessed that this fight had captured the interest of Little Four, and under his cajoling persuasion, she would be set upon a path directly opposed to her original plan, moving further away from a stable and peaceful life to a life full of bloody carnage...

Blissfully unaware of the difficult battles to come in her future, Ling Lan patiently waited for Ling Qin to defeat the final enemy. Ling Lan was very cautious — before she could be sure it was safe, she had kept a tight lid on her presence. Although she had learnt some combat skills and had survived the primordial forest, this was still not enough for her to go up against these experienced killers.

Furthermore, it was possible that far away from here, somewhere out of Little Four's radar, stronger mecha were lying in wait, just waiting for her to reveal herself.

Ling Lan did not believe that she was a victor in life, who could exude dominance with just a shake of her body, and easily cut through all clamouring enemies as if they were experience fodder. She was also not the type of female main character who was loved by everyone around her, who would have flowers blooming in her presence (it wasn't like she could be a female main character right now anyway), who — when in a difficult situation — would have a prince charming come riding to her rescue...

Right then, Little Four suddenly exclaimed in shock, causing Ling Lan's heart to jump into her throat again. *"What's going on, Little Four?"*

Little Four did not answer, but moved the display screen he was looking at in front of her.

On the screen, the two mecha that were busily evading were suddenly surrounded by three different groups of people.

The first group, which was also the most aggressive looking group, had the fewest people. They consisted of only four mecha, but exuded a heavy aura, completely overpowering the other groups in terms of sheer presence.

Their mecha had strange outer appearances, clearly shorter than the other mecha by a head, about 50 to 60 cm, but their torsos and limbs were obviously thicker and bulkier. The joints of the four limbs, in particular, were so thick that they lacked all sense of grace and beauty. But it was precisely this sort of rough and unsophisticated mecha which could strike fear into people's hearts, mounting pressure on their opponents.

These mecha had clearly undergone reinforcement procedures for all their parts. Whether it be in terms of weapon weight load or melee combat, these mecha would perform better than other humanoid standard mecha. At a glance, one could tell they were killing machines, and their body paint emphasised this — they were not painted in Federation white, but rather in a dark understated crimson, which just added to the overall aggression and bloodlust the mecha exuded.

Clearly, these four mecha had rushed over here after a fight, as there were still the signs of battle on their bodies. They were indeed 413's squad. Just as they had been struggling to find Ling Lan, fruitlessly and helplessly, Ling Qin's signal flare had given them direction, and they had finally managed to catch up.

The second group was a troop of six mecha. Their appearance was very similar to Federation regulation mecha, only bearing some slight adjustments. Instead of the uniform bright white, they were a mix of white and blue. Anyone with an understanding of the Federation's mecha would know that these mecha were captain-level mecha, which were one level above the standard mecha. It looked like this troop was from the federal military.

And the final group was a troop of five, common standard mecha, though painted in a dark grey colour denoting that they were private forces. The Federation had an agreement with the elite families, permitting the families to have their own private forces, but their mecha could only be the most basic standard mecha, and the colour of those mecha must be dark grey. The only way to distinguish between the mecha of differing private forces was the logo painted on the chest plate of the mecha.

The logos on the chest plates of this troop of mecha was the Ling family's — a blazing fire phoenix, eye-catching and vibrant. This troop was the Ling family loyalists, the mecha troop responsible for Ling Lan's safety.

The fire phoenix was one of the spiritual totems of the ancient Chinese people, and the Ling family personally believed that they were the descendants of the god-beast fire

phoenix. Hence, they had naturally selected the fire phoenix as their family crest.

When Ling Lan had found out the origin story behind her family crest, she had almost been unable to stop herself from bursting out in laughter. Who'd have guessed that ten thousand years later, in such a technologically advanced era, such unfounded myths and legends would still be around? All she could say was that humanity's love and obsession with the concept of god was just bone-deep.

Of course, it was only called the fire phoenix within the Chinese Federation and its allied countries; in the neutral countries or the enemy nations, it was often referred to as the 'undead bird', and ever since Ling Lan's father Ling Xiao had become a god-class operator, it had degenerated into being called 'that dead bird'— you could just see how deep the enemy's hatred ran.

The three groups saw each other almost simultaneously and raised their respective guards immediately. However, the Ling family troops drew closer to the Federation troops, seemingly intent on allying themselves with them to oppose the other team, the one with the four fearsome looking mecha.

Ling Lan couldn't help but frown, asking Little Four, *"Little Four, could you zoom in closer, and hack their communications?"*

"Zooming in is fine, but I can't hack their communications. Your current spiritual power cannot support such long-distance hacking." Little Four's words contained a tinge of contempt, and combined with the stink eye Little Four was giving her, there was only one conclusion — she was being looked down upon by Little Four.

Ever since Ling Lan had found out that her body may be ravaged by her spiritual power if it was too much for her body to handle, Ling Lan had been very wary of her spiritual power. She had not forgotten the daily suffering she had gone through in her previous life because of it. That's why, in this life, Ling Lan did not dare to cultivate her spiritual power on her own, fearful that she would overdo it and end up causing irreparable harm to her body.

As such, no matter how much Little Four wheedled, Ling Lan had never used her honour points to redeem anything related to spiritual power training within her mind-space. Still, even so, at six years old, Ling Lan's spiritual power was already at the peak of tier-4 — with just the right push, she would naturally break past the tier-4 barrier to enter tier-5.

Of course, Ling Lan's impressive three tier increase in spiritual power since birth was not really because of her talent in spiritual power, or because it grew too fast — from the beginning, Little Four had sealed up two tiers of Ling Lan's spiritual power. But now, as Ling Lan's physical body slowly developed and grew stronger, Little Four had gradually unravelled the seal around her spiritual power.

The potential problem of her overwhelming spiritual power was so quickly resolved due to Ling Lan's diligence in practising her Qi exercises.

In truth, Ling Lan's spiritual power at birth was actually tier-4. The information Lan Luofeng, Ling Qin, and the military had received was actually fake, a result of manipulation by Little Four.

It was for this reason that, back during Ling Lan's newborn assessment, the assessment device had started screeching in warning. The assessment devices for public use were only able to withstand up to tier-3 spiritual power, military-use assessment devices excluded.

Why did the public-use assessment devices have such a setting? That was because without special care, any child with tier-4 spiritual power would certainly die within the womb, body collapsing under the weight of its spiritual power. It was impossible for a child with tier-4 spiritual power to be born naturally without advanced technological support. Of course, Ling Lan was able to grow well enough in Lan Luofeng's body, primarily due to Little Four's assistance — as mentioned, Little Four had sealed away the excess spiritual power.

However, both success and failure were two sides of the same coin — when Little Four discovered the capabilities of the assessment device to measure spiritual power, he had released all of Ling Lan's spiritual power out of curiosity, wanting to know how high Ling Lan's spiritual power was. Unexpectedly, this almost ended in disaster, almost blowing up the device. If it weren't for Little Four's fast reflexes, quickly resealing Ling Lan's spiritual power back to tier-2, the results would have been catastrophic.

Frankly, Ling Lan's body at birth could bear up to tier-3 spiritual power, though her body would certainly be a little weakened. However, prioritising safety, Little Four had fixed Ling Lan's spiritual power at tier-2.

In any case, Ling Lan had not wasted these past six years. With the passage of time,

Ling Lan's spiritual power had grown till the peak of tier-4. It shouldn't be long now before all her efforts culminated and she naturally ascended to a mind-blowing tier-5 at her age.

If the federal military ever found out that a six year old child had managed to achieve tier-5 when most grown men could not, they would certainly be floored. She was certain to be hailed as a genius among geniuses in terms of spiritual power.

Chapter 53

The Ling Family Rescuers!

On the screen, that troop of four crimson mechas had immediately gotten into battle stances, but they did not make the first move. Instead, one of the mechas tried to initiate communications via shouting. Unfortunately, Ling Lan couldn't hear anything from this distance — it made her have the sudden urge to rush into the learning space and redeem some spiritual power cultivation skills so that she could raise her spiritual power enough for Little Four to hack into their communication systems.

Right at that moment, the frozen tableau of the three groups suddenly turned as one to face a particular direction. It turned out that the two mechas which had been evading Little Four's projectiles had inadvertently stumbled into the detection range of the three groups.

The evading mecha B abruptly received an emergency warning from his mecha's systems. "Warning, enemy detected. Warning, enemy detected."

Only then did mecha B notice that several red dots had appeared on his radar, and when he drew closer, fifteen mechas from three different forces were displayed on his screen. By now, their weapons had already been levelled against him, but weren't locked on just yet.

"F*ck this, why are there so many mechas here? Wasn't it agreed that there would be no one else here?" Mecha B's entire chest felt cold, and his back was drenched with cold sweat... could it be that this so-called mission was actually a trap?

Mecha A had also noticed these mechas, and his face paled dramatically. He seemed to have the same suspicions. "Head, let's just run."

Mecha B grit his teeth; he glanced at the many mechas before him on his screen, and then glanced at the two homing projectiles close behind them. Relying on his battle experience, he made a snap judgement. "Follow me closely. We'll just charge through." In this hopeless situation where they were facing a pincer attack, there was no room for them to retreat — only by charging forward might they have some hope of surviving.

The two mechas did not stop, accelerating instead as they rushed towards those mecha. Of course, as they moved, mecha B did not forget to open general communications to say, "Mecha squad 37 of the Seventh Division in the Third Army, please help us to eliminate the homing projectiles behind us..."

Mecha B knew that this lie would be easily seen through, but his objective was not really to fool them — he only needed them to hesitate and not open fire, so that he and his partner would have the one minute they needed to escape from their attack radius and leave for safety. If they were a little luckier, they may even be able to borrow the opponents' strength to get rid of the two projectiles sticking to them like gum.

Sure enough, when the opponent heard the words coming through the general comms channel, one of the squads lowered their particle-beam guns, while another squad lifted their weapons to train them on the air behind him and his partner. Only the four crimson mechas were still wary of them, facing them unwaveringly.

Meanwhile, on Ling Lan's end, as she couldn't hack into the groups' communications, she could only watch in confusion as the two enemy mecha flew like moths to a flame towards the fifteen rescue mechas. She then saw the six mechas representing the military open fire first, however, they didn't do it to kill those two mechas, but helped them instead to destroy the two homing projectiles tracking them.

Ling Lan's brow furrowed, and her expression turned grim. Could it be that this assassination attempt on her was sanctioned by the military? Was it because she had proved to be too outstanding by absorbing too much gene stimulating agent, drawing the concern of the higher ranks of the military?

No! Ling Lan immediately threw out that possibility. These past few years, although Ling Lan had been forbidden from going onto the internet due to her being underage, she was still aware of the information available on the net. Little Four had given her a detailed overview of her new world, letting her know that this present world she was in was a militant world. From birth, every person was prepped to become qualified military personnel, and among all the military positions, mecha operators were considered the cream of the crop...

The requirements to become a basic level operator were still rather common, but the requirements to be an advanced operator were just too demanding. Especially with regards to physical fitness — that requirement could almost be called insane. Thus, the Federation greatly prized all children who had the possibility to become advanced

operators, and all military branches and divisions were responsible to monitor and protect these children. They would never go after her for this reason.

Excluding this possibility, then, as such a young child, who could she have offended? The Ling family members who had been chased out of Doha? They did not have the guts to do this – if investigations found their hand behind this, the military would make sure that the Ling family would be utterly eradicated from within the Federation – the Ling family could not take the risk.

So, excluding herself, and also excluding the family, Ling Lan abruptly thought of the premium military benefits she had inherited. Before he died, her father Ling Xiao had been the youngest Major General in the Federation — could it have something to do with her father?

Ling Lan felt that this was a likely possibility — perhaps when her father had still been serving in the military, he had inadvertently offended some people...

Only now did Ling Lan notice that she really didn't know much about her father Ling Xiao. She felt a little regretful — all these years, why hadn't she thought of asking Chamberlain Ling Qin and her other guardians about her father?

Of course, Ling Lan knew that her father was the Federation's... uh, no, the whole universe's coolest, handsomest, most young and impressive, most outstanding, most formidable yet gentle, and flawless gentleman. (All the above was directly quoted from her mum Lan Luofeng, which led Ling Lan to conclude that a woman deeply in love was extremely blind. She would never say that out loud, of course, just letting this opinion stew within her, or else she would certainly be whisked away by her mum for a thorough spanking.)

Pity the present Ling Lan, who only knew her father had been one of the youngest Major General's in the Federation, and that he had died in a chaotic death tunnel during the war with the Ferrand Empire. As for anything else regarding Ling Xiao, she knew nothing... um, well, that's not quite true — she also had the extremely embarrassing and overblown description her mum Lan Luofeng had insisted on telling her.

Ling Lan decided that when she returned safely this time, she would go find out more about her father and get to the bottom of things. She didn't want to have to be on her guard every day against hidden enemies — she liked having all the information within

her hands so that she could chop off any trouble at its root.

Although all these thoughts went swirling through Ling Lan's mind, it was actually a matter of a split second. Meanwhile, when the two enemy mechas had gotten close enough to the fifteen mechas, the four crimson mechas that had been still and silent till now suddenly sprang into action, doing something that stunned all the other operators.

The four mechas had waited till the two enemy mechas were close to them before firmly pulling on their triggers. Countless high-temperature beams shot out from their guns, two mechas in a group, as they fired at the cockpits of the two enemy mechas.

The cockpits could not handle the high temperatures of the particle beams and finally exploded, blowing up the mechas along with them, all of it raining down to the ground in a fall of debris.

At that point, the military squad finally shook themselves out of their shock, and immediately raised their weapons agitatedly, aiming at the four crimson mechas. The situation was tense, and battle looked imminent.

The mecha squad from the Ling family was cunning — knowing that this was not a matter which concerned them, they quietly snuck away as the other two groups faced off against one another. Right now, their top priority was to locate their Young Master Lan; everything else was none of their business.

They soon found the right direction and sped off towards Ling Lan's location. At their current speed, it probably wouldn't even take one minute for them to arrive.

Little Four cast a longing glance at those four extremely powerful crimson mechas, and then looked back at the hover car he was controlling with disdain. He had completely forgotten how excited he was when he had first obtained the hover car, and how grateful he was when he had discovered the plasma cannons it was equipped with... As expected, comparisons should be avoided — the moment one learns how to differentiate between good and bad in terms of quality, then pickiness and disgust are sure to follow. This was a bad habit that no sentient being could avoid.

Thirty-five seconds later, two particle beams shot out towards Ling Qin at almost the same time, striking the final two opponents he had been struggling with. The two men, which included the team captain, died on the spot.

Ling Qin exhaled deeply, slowly pulling back his attack stance to stand straight once more. With a smile on his face, he looked up at the sky and watched as five mechas appeared before him. The loyalists protecting Ling Lan were finally here; he could finally relax.

As the tension eased from his stance, Ling Qin could feel the aches and pains in his body making themselves known. He knew that this was the result of drawing on his latent reserves, but it was fine — the Ling family had a medicinal bath to repair this sort of damage. As long as he could rest for a couple of days, his body would recover. Of course, for Ling Qin, as long as Ling Lan was safe, even if his body was destroyed in the process, he would regret nothing.

The five mechas slowly descended in front of Ling Qin, until they all landed soundly. Then, three of the mechas continued to maintain a vigilant lookout, while the cockpits of the other two mechas opened up. The operators in those two mechas stood on a halcyon and were lowered slowly to the ground. They were both dressed in a blue and white standard mecha operator uniform, with the Ling family fire phoenix logo emblazoned on their chests, flickering in an almost lifelike manner under the sunlight as if it were about to take flight.

The moment they landed, the two men hurried over to Ling Qin's side and removed their helmets. The one in the lead had a remorseful expression on his face as he said, "Elder Qin, sorry, our rescue was late." He was a hulking man, with a strong body and a strong face, with an honest and sincere expression. He was roughly thirty-four to thirty-five years old, and was very mature and reliable.

Ling Qin was very dissatisfied with the slow response time of the Ling family mecha rescue team. In this period of time, if they hadn't been so lucky that the opponent's hover car hadn't fired its cannons... although it still fired them in the end, the projectiles had seemed uncontrolled, flying wildly in some random direction, otherwise he would have been dead a thousand times over. And once he died, would Ling Lan – this six year old child – have had time to escape?

Furiously, he said, "Ling Hua, what really happened? Why didn't you keep up with us?" The Ling family mecha squad was supposed to trail Ling Lan at all times, not allowing her out of their monitoring range. The Ling family had straightforward demands of the loyalists protecting the master — in cases of danger, they had to be on the scene within 10 seconds, unless it happened in a location where military force was forbidden, such as at the scout academies. But this time, the Ling family mecha squad

had been delayed for a whole 5 minutes and more — this was something Ling Qin could not tolerate.

Ling Hua did not argue, only saying with remorse, "Sorry, Elder Qin, it's our fault."

Right then, the young man following Ling Hua spoke up, explaining, "Elder Qin, we fell for the opponent's stratagem to lure us away — by the time we figured it out and rushed back, we had lost track of both you and Young Master Lan."

"Ling Yu!" raged Ling Hua, as if unwilling to let Ling Yu explain. Perhaps he had decided that a mistake was a mistake, and that there was no excusing it.

Chapter 54

Ling Lan's Loyalists

When Ling Qin heard what Ling Yu said, his attitude gentled considerably. Shaking his head, he sighed, "Oh you, why didn't you say anything and just take all the blame on your shoulders? Youngster Hua, don't push yourself too hard. This time, you all still made it in time, otherwise my old bones would have been ended here today."

Ling Hua had been raised single-handedly by Ling Qin, which was why Ling Qin was so harsh on him. The deeper the love, the greater the expectation — Ling Qin had very high expectations of Ling Hua, cultivating him as his successor. It was his hope that after he passed away, Ling Hua would be able to take over his position and continue to protect the Ling family, Ling Lan, and her future children.

Still, perhaps Ling Qin had been too harsh on him, causing Ling Hua's personality to become increasingly reserved, bottling everything up inside his heart. Even when he had been wrongfully accused, he would still keep quiet, silently taking all the blame.

This time, Ling Hua reacted in the same way. Although Ling Yu had explained on his behalf, and Ling Qin did not continue to berate him, Ling Hua still couldn't get over his own inner guilt, saying, "Sorry, Teacher, I have disappointed you."

Ling Hua's fierce eyes were filled with pain and self-remonstrance — his carelessness and wrongful judgement this time had almost ended in disaster, causing him to feel extremely ashamed.

Ling Yu felt that he could not let his team captain continue to blame himself; the pressure upon his captain was just too intense. He looked around briefly, and saw no sign of Ling Lan. His expression changed drastically as he asked, "Elder Qin, what's going on? Where's Young Master Lan? Why don't I see Young Master Lan? Did something happen?"

Ling Qin hurried to reassure him, "It's fine, it's fine, Young Master Lan is very well. He's just in hiding!"

He turned his head to look at Ling Hua, chuckling, "Young Master Lan is... very

intelligent, and also very level-headed. I believe that he won't be any worse than any of the previous Ling family heads — you'll like him."

Ling Qin's tone was full of pride — the rationality and calmness Ling Lan had displayed during moments of crisis was just too remarkable. Even Ling Lan's father Ling Xiao might not have done any better than Ling Lan at six years old.

Although Ling Qin had jumped out of the car at the same time as Ling Lan, Ling Qin had still spared some attention to keep an eye on Ling Lan's actions, afraid that Ling Lan would make a mistake under pressure. Unexpectedly, Ling Lan's conduct had thrilled him immensely — be it choosing a piece of debris to hide behind in mid-air, or even the handling of her landing, everything had been almost perfect. In the end, it was Ling Qin's hiding spot that had been discovered instead, forcing him to battle just for the hope of survival.

The more Ling Qin thought about it, the happier he became, and the smile on his face deepened accordingly. Perhaps grandparental love was a part of human nature, prompting elders in the family to take solace and fawn easily over their grandchildren and those of the same generation. Ling Qin selectively chose to forget that at six years old, Ling Xiao had already been thrown by his own father into the wilderness for survival training. In terms of resilience and keeping cool under pressure, Ling Xiao was certainly no weaker than the current Ling Lan.

At Ling Qin's words, Ling Hua's raised brows revealed his astonishment, but his expression was quickly smoothed back into his usual calm mask as he asked, "Teacher, then where is Young Master Lan now?"

Ling Qin signalled for them to walk with him. The three of them walked past several patches of shrubs and arrived at that wide expanse of flat plain, spreading out before them without a single hiding place in sight.

Looking out at this scene, the mature and reliable Ling Hua did not react in any way, patiently waiting for Chamberlain Ling Qin to explain. However, the young Ling Yu could not hold back his confusion, and asked, "Elder Qin, there's no place for anyone to hide here. Why did you bring us here? To look at the scenery? What's so interesting about a plot of yellow soil? It would be better to find Young Master Lan instead, so that we can protect him better."

Ling Yu's words implied that Chamberlain Ling Qin shouldn't fool around with them

any longer, that finding Young Master Ling Lan was more important.

Ling Qin glared at Ling Yu irritably, and smacked him on the head, barking, "You rascal, am I that unreliable? Dammit, don't speak up if you know nothing. Disgraceful! Just keep following me and you'll see."

Ling Qin continued to lead the two of them forward, muttering all the way, "Really, you've been following after your team captain for around two to three years already, why haven't you learnt the least bit of composure? Still so impatient..." Ling Qin was somewhat puzzled — Ling Hua was so steady; after being in constant contact with him for these two to three years, Ling Yu's character should have settled down somewhat as well. Why was he still so restless? In the future, how would he take over Ling Hua's position to become the next mecha squad captain?

Ling Yu pulled a long face behind Ling Qin's back, twitching his brows and eyes at his captain as if asking him — had Elder Qin always been so naggy like this?

Ling Hua smiled wryly, communicating with his eyes that Ling Yu should just bear with it — he himself was already used to this.

Ling Qin finally arrived at the piece of debris Ling Lan had used to conceal herself, and he chuckled as he asked the two men beside him, "Do you sense anything?"

Ling Hua looked at that piece of debris before them, and his eyes flashed, thoughtfulness stealing over his face. Meanwhile, Ling Yu's face was full of bewilderment, seemingly completely clueless about what Chamberlain Ling Qin meant. Before him was obviously a flat piece of land — even if there was a small sheet of metal on top of it, it was still just a flat piece of land. There was really no place at all for someone to hide here, right? After all, could anyone be as thin as a piece of paper?

Ling Hua squatted down and touched the sheet of metal. "Young Master Lan should be right below this, right? It is indeed a great hiding place. Young Master Lan is very smart."

At Ling Hua's words, Ling Qin's smile grew even wider, causing his relatively wrinkle-free face to crinkle up into a smile as vibrant as a blooming flower. "That's right, Young Master Lan is just below." Squatting down as well, he knocked gently on the metal sheet, saying, "Young Master Lan, it's safe now, come out quickly."

The metal plate remained motionless, as if no one was below it. But just as Ling Yu

started to wonder if Chamberlain Ling Qin was going senile, misremembering the location, the metal plate actually started to move. It twitched and then lifted up slightly, revealing a tiny gap between the plate and the ground.

Although the gap was really really narrow, Ling Yu could still clearly see the difference. He looked on with a face full of astonishment — who'd have guessed that there was really someone hiding below?

When Ling Lan saw that the person standing outside was really Ling Qin, she excitedly threw off the metal plate on top of her, jumped out of the hole, and hugged Ling Qin tight. As she did so, her little body was actually trembling.

Ling Qin sighed, and hugged Ling Lan in return. Although Ling Lan had reacted well under pressure, making all the right decisions, she was still just a child after all. That life and death situation must have really frightened her.

Ling Hua and Ling Yu could now see the ground below the metal sheet, and so finally understood how Ling Lan had managed to hide herself under it. There was a deep man-shaped ditch in the ground, perfectly sized for Ling Lan's body. As such, the sheet would cover it completely when Ling Lan was inside, and still remain parallel to the ground. This would lead outside observers to believe that it was just flat ground, and utterly dismiss the metal sheet.

Ling Hua looked at Ling Lan with a complex gaze. This ditch was most likely forcefully created by Ling Lan at the moment she landed — this meant that their little master was not to be taken lightly, both in terms of strength and situational adaptability. No wonder Chamberlain Ling Qin was so pleased — with Ling Lan in the family, the Ling family would never fall.

Still, due to her young age, she was unable to keep calm to the end yet, and was starting to show signs of aftershock now.

Ling Lan seemed to take comfort in Chamberlain Ling Qin's hug, and when she lifted her head once more, her face had regained its usual calmness, and her eyes no longer held the remnants of fear and shock that they had when he first saw her. Ling Hua nodded to himself. Their Young Master Lan's mental resilience seemed to be exceptional, and she seemed able to adjust her emotions well. As expected of a child who inherited their Master Ling Xiao's excellent genes — several years later, she would certainly be able to become an ace operator, perhaps even a royal operator...

Ling Hua directed a friendly smile at Ling Lan — he wasn't good with words, and he also had no idea how to interact with a child, but he couldn't go wrong with a smile.

Ling Lan glanced at him curiously, and then tugged lightly on Chamberlain Ling Qin's sleeve, silently asking for Chamberlain Ling Qin to introduce these two men to her.

Ling Qin pointed at Ling Hua and said, "He's called Ling Hua, a Ling family loyalist, captain of the Ling family mecha force, responsible for the master's safety when he is out working. This time, he's in charge of the squad guarding us in secret." And then he pointed at Ling Yu, who had been trying to pose as a big brother figure beside Ling Lan, and said, "This brat is called Ling Yu. He's a member of the force, Young Master Lan can just choose to ignore him." With Ling Yu's erratic behaviour, Ling Qin was afraid that Ling Lan would be infected by it after too much exposure, so it would be better to just separate them from the start.

Ling Lan nodded at Ling Hua, and then asked Chamberlain Ling Qin, "Did something happen to the mecha squad, which is why they didn't manage to keep up with us?"

Ling Yu sputtered in surprise, "Young Master Lan, how did you know we had encountered some trouble?"

Ling Lan rolled her eyes at him, saying in contempt, "Why else would you all arrive so late?"

Ling Hua's gaze brightened unnaturally, but he quickly lowered his lashes, shielding his thoughts.

Ling Yu thought about it and couldn't help but agree — since the Ling family squad had not managed to arrive until this late, it went without saying that they must have been lured away by the enemy or had been caught in a trap. Why was he so stupid? To the extent that he was being looked down upon by a six year old child.

He could only rub at his nose in embarrassment and pretend that he could not feel Ling Lan's contempt as he replied seriously, "When we had just passed by Qiya City earlier and entered this wasteland, the captain was the first to notice a squad of mecha sneakily trailing Young Master Lan. To ensure the safety of Young Master Lan, the captain sent Ling Ze and two other men to draw away those mecha, while the captain and I continued to follow the both of you from far away. But soon enough, we had met up with another group of mecha which already had their weapons set up, who clearly

intended to harm Young Master Lan. The captain and I could only open fire and draw away those mecha personally... and then find a way to slip away."

Reaching this point in his explanation, Ling Yu's expression was dark, "Later, the captain and I managed to regain contact, only to find that we had all been drawn far away from Young Master Lan, completely losing any sign of Young Master Lan. We realised then that we had probably fallen for the enemy's stratagem of Luring the Tiger out of the Mountains. Thinking back on those mecha, they were better than us in terms of both numbers and equipment. It was still possible for the captain to escape, but at my level, I shouldn't have been able to escape, but I managed to..."

Ling Yu was very depressed. He bowed his head, deeply regretful that he had not noticed all this back then, almost causing trouble to befall the Ling family's only hope. If he had figured out the enemy's intention earlier, even if he had to fight to the death, he would still stick to Young Master Lan. Moreover, he would send out a signal flare so that the other members would be able to rush to the rescue quicker.

Ling Hua was also full of self-recrimination. This cockup was entirely his fault — if he hadn't made the wrong decision, Ling Lan and Ling Qin would never have been pushed into such a dire situation, almost losing their lives in battle.

After Ling Lan had heard what Ling Yu had to say, her little face was grim. "This couldn't be helped. The enemy's plans were detailed and well-connected — even if you all had figured it out from the start and rushed over, it would probably have been useless anyway, and may even have forced the enemy to be even more vicious. Isn't everything just fine now? Everyone survived — that's a good thing, right? As long as we live, there's hope, and we can do what we want to do, no matter whether it's to protect or to seek revenge..."

Ling Lan sent a warning glance at Ling Yu. "I sure hope no Ling family member is a retard..." She had noticed Ling Yu's yearning to die in battle, perhaps wanting to redeem himself in this manner out of self-blame. However, this sort of retarded action was something Ling Lan despised — she would not allow her loyalists to become this kind of person.

Although Ling Lan's words were a little blunt, Ling Qin was very satisfied. Ling Lan's words had been both gentle yet firm, managing to convey the authority of a master without involving baseless anger, full of understanding and mercy. With this, Ling Hua and Ling Yu should be able to truly recognise Ling Lan as their master.

The Ling family loyalists — although generation after generation were dedicated to the Ling family head at the time, getting them to serve with their lives still required the head to earn their acknowledgement. This was the Ling family's way, a part of their rules and culture — according to the old ancestor's will, if the current head could not get the proud family loyalists to submit, then he should have no business pursuing any grand ambitions. He should just stay at home obediently and focus on siring children, living out his idyllic life.

The Ling family had set the submission of the loyalists as a trial of passage — success meant that the head could go out into the world and pursue his ambitions, while failure meant the head should just give up his dreams and stay home, and protect the already established family assets.

As expected, Ling Yu's face was full of emotion. His eyes were no longer downcast, but were shining brightly on his face. In this moment, he had truly become Ling Lan's loyalist and was no longer just a Ling family loyalist.

Chapter 55

I Suspected It From the Very Beginning!

After regaining his good cheer, Ling Yu noticed Ling Lan staring curiously at the particle-beam handgun at his waist. Showing off, he pulled out the handgun and passed it to Ling Lan, saying, "You like it? This is a particle-beam handgun — although its firepower is no match for submachine guns, it's still more than enough to wipe out anyone not wearing a protective vest."

Ling Lan's eyes sparkled as she accepted the handgun, excitement clear on her face. She lowered her head and began studying the gun, as if curious about how the particle-beam gun was assembled.

A smile played on Ling Hua's lips. In this moment, Ling Lan had reverted to a regular child, full of curiosity towards something she had never seen before.

Only Ling Qin looked strangely at Ling Lan — he knew that Ling Lan had long known about this sort of weapons, why did she want to feign enthusiasm? Still, he said nothing. He believed that Ling Lan must have her reasons for doing so, so he would wait patiently for the answer to be revealed at the end.

Watching as Ling Lan fiddled around clumsily with the handgun, Ling Yu nervously reminded, "Don't flick off that safety. That's the switch — pressing it carelessly will cause problems."

Ling Lan cast a reproachful look at Ling Yu, as if cross that he didn't trust her, but she was soon fully absorbed in playing around with the particle-beam handgun in her hands again. Not long after, after she had played her fill, she seemed to lose interest, and just as she was about to return the gun to Ling Yu, she suddenly saw that the handgun on Ling Hua's waist was different than the one in her hands. With some confusion, she asked Ling Hua, "Why is your particle-beam handgun different from this one?" shaking the gun in her hand.

Smiling widely, Ling Hua answered, "This is because the captain's designated weapons are different from the team members'."

"Oh? So that's why... can I take a look at your handgun?" Ling Lan's eyes were full of curiosity, as if she really wanted to know what was special about the captain's handgun.

With just a little hesitation, Ling Hua pulled out his particle-beam gun and handed it over to Ling Lan. Of course, he did not forget to caution, "Make sure you don't open the safety catch. This handgun is four to five times stronger than the regular particle-beam handguns, almost on par with submachine guns. Young Master Lan, take care."

Ling Lan nodded obediently; she was not one to reject another's good intentions. Accepting the obviously larger handgun into her hands, she held the two guns up side by side in comparison. They actually didn't look that much different from the outside; only the tail-end, which housed the energy storage unit, and the barrel were noticeably thicker and larger than those on the regular particle-beam handguns.

Ling Lan played around with the two guns in her hands for a bit, but just as Ling Hua and Ling Yu were about to ask for their guns back, Ling Lan's next move immediately caused their eyelids to twitch uncontrollably. They had never thought that their own Young Master Lan could be so shameless — she blatantly put the two handguns directly into her protective vest, and even patted the compartments they were in with satisfaction after. That smug expression on her face told them loud and clear that the two particle-beam handguns were hers now, confiscated as part of her collection.

Ling Hua laughed helplessly, looking at Ling Qin in hopes that he could say something to convince Young Master Lan to give the guns back. After all, these were their standard weapons, a necessary part of their equipment.

However, just as Ling Qin was planning to do just that, Ling Lan sent a pointed look his way, sharp and determined. His heart thudded in response, and he instantly changed his mind. Instead, he subtly indicated to Ling Hua that they should just let Young Master Lan satisfy her curiosity, and as for their weapons, they would be suitably compensated by Logistics when they got back to the Ling household.

Ling Hua and Ling Yu could only pretend they hadn't seen anything, while Ling Lan smirked like the cat that ate the canary. Their small group quickly left the deserted plains and returned to the place where Ling Hua and Ling Yu's mecha were parked. Ling Lan eyed those two gigantic mecha. Right now, standing proudly on the ground, looking down upon Ling Lan and the others, the mecha loomed large before her, making her feel exceptionally weak and fragile. It would be so easy for these mecha to

crush her. The rush of emotion was too great, causing the excitement to blaze from her eyes as if she had just seen her most beloved toy.

In reality, Ling Lan wasn't as crazy about mecha as she made herself look to be, however, the cool mecha that she had only seen in anime and manga in her previous world was now standing right in front of her as something real and tangible... this made her feel as if she was in a dream, and for a moment, she was unsure whether she was still here or had gone back to her previous world. Thus, Ling Lan could no longer maintain her calm facade.

"So this is our Ling family mecha? It looks so powerful." Ling Lan couldn't help but exclaim.

Ling Hua laughed, thinking back on his first time ever seeing a mecha — his reaction then had been much like Ling Lan's now.

Ling Yu became even more animated, boasting proudly, "Of course! But private mecha can only be this sort of standard mecha. If you enter the military, perhaps you can get even better mecha, and if you can become an ace operator, you can even change the colour of your mecha freely... I really wish I could paint my mecha in my favourite colour red..."

"Stop dreaming. We won't even have the chance to upgrade to a captain level mecha." Ling Hua voiced his regrets for the first time. Every mecha operator would like to pilot the best mecha he could handle, and soar freely among the stars, cutting down all enemies before him, being able to dominate through fearlessness and sheer strength.

Unfortunately, mecha were still considered restricted goods in the Federation. Even if some families had the right to own private mecha, all they could get were still the most basic standard mecha within the Federation.

Having his dream shattered by his own captain, Ling Yu could only sigh. Becoming a family loyalist meant that they could no longer pursue a military career.

Ling Lan seemed oblivious to Ling Hua and Ling Yu's actions, walking up to the mecha in a daze. She reached out to touch anywhere she could reach, and her fingertips met a smooth coldness, just as she expected from a metallic outer casing.

She wasn't content to just feel up one, running her hands over the other mecha as well. The slightly sleazy way she did it sent chills running through Ling Hua and Ling Yu as

if they themselves were the ones who had been molested. It couldn't be helped — every mecha operator was very protective of his own mecha, loving it just as if it were his own body, which is why the two reacted this way.

At that moment, a loud rumble could be heard coming from above. Ling Lan lifted her head and immediately saw three mecha flying overhead in a radius of roughly 100 metres, each vigilantly watching the direction it was responsible for.

Ling Hua walked up to her and asked, "Young Master Lan, would you like to see how a mecha moves close up?"

Ling Qin frowned slightly. Was it really appropriate to use mecha to entertain a child at this time? Their safety hadn't been guaranteed yet after all.

Seeing this, Ling Hua explained, "The military group came together with us. They are guarding the outer perimeter right now, and we only managed to escape earlier due to their help."

Ling Lan looked up at Ling Qin with a face full of hope, stopping Ling Qin's words of refusal within his throat. Fine, just consider it as a sort of compensation. Ling Lan had almost lost her life this time, it should be fine to spoil her for a bit. So Ling Qin nodded, giving his approval.

At this, Ling Lan saw Ling Hua winking at her conspiratorially, prompting her to giggle. Looks like Ling Hua really wanted to entertain her and had arranged this on purpose.

Immediately, Ling Hua connected the communicator on his wrist. "Ling Ze, fly a bit lower so Young Master Lan can see how cool you all are. Make it a good show!" Ling Hua's words had a double meaning, subtly telling the other members that they shouldn't just do a simple sweep, but should include a few fancier moves — children loved those, after all.

"Roger!" Ling Ze got the point instantly.

The three mecha revved their engines and began flying circles above Ling Lan. And then they began executing various basic flying manoeuvres and combat moves, causing Ling Lan to drink it all in excitedly, clapping and jumping unabashedly.

After a set of extremely fancy movements, the three mecha suddenly dropped rapidly, causing Ling Lan to scream out in shock, before coming to a sudden stop, drawing

laughter from Ling Lan once more.

Watching this scene, Ling Qin felt tears gather in his eyes. Ling Lan's usually mature demeanour often made Ling Qin almost forget that Ling Lan was just a six year old child — it was natural for her to be this innocent and carefree. Sadly, due to Master Ling Xiao premature death, she had had no choice but to bear the mountainous burdens of the Ling family, which was why he had no choice but to force Ling Lan to grow up so quickly...

This was supposed to have been something her father would have shown her, but was now being performed for her by the Ling family loyalists. If only the mecha flying above were Ling Xiao's IN mecha — how wonderful that would be.

The three mecha finally finished their performance and began their descent. To avoid shaking the ground too much, they activated the anti-gravity function of the engine. The mecha gradually descended, and the immense thrust energy coming from the engine caused Ling Lan, who was standing closest to the mecha, to lose her footing. Just as she was about to fall over, however, Ling Hua reacted and grabbed hold of Ling Lan, holding Ling Lan still even as he stabilized her.

On Ling Lan's lowered face, a flash of killing intent came and went. Wasn't Ling Hua holding on just a bit too tightly?

A cold awareness spread through Ling Lan's eyes, and her hands, feet, waist, and torso all shifted slightly in preparation...

The mecha got closer and closer, and Ling Lan raised her head with difficulty. From Ling Hua's height, he could clearly see the expression on Ling Lan's face, full of excitement and joy, completely clueless about what would happen to her soon.

A trace of regret and hesitation flashed through Ling Hua's eyes...

Right then, the three mecha which had just landed suddenly raised up their right arms simultaneously, directing their lightspeed guns squarely at Ling Lan. Before anyone could react, Ling Hua, who had been holding Ling Lan, suddenly lifted Ling Lan's entire body up and threw her upwards into the air with all his might...

Flying above Ling Hua's head, Ling Lan could clearly see Ling Qin rushing over from behind Ling Hua with a face full of fear and panic, while an enraged Ling Yu followed close behind.

Unfortunately, it was too late, as two of the three mecha aiming at Ling Lan abruptly turned to transfer their aim to Ling Qin and Ling Yu...

Quicker than words could say, a decisive chokehold!

Ling Lan's right arm shot out at an angle which defied human physics, forcibly bending to lock onto Ling Hua's throat, and pivoting on this chokehold, she pulled back her body backwards in mid-air to hide herself behind Ling Hua's back. At the same time, a particle-beam handgun had appeared in Ling Lan's left hand and then it was pressed harshly against Ling Hua's temple.

"Don't move!" Ling Lan yelled out, freezing the three mecha in their tracks. If she had just been a bit slower, they would have pulled their triggers.

Suddenly finding himself in a reversed hostage situation, Ling Hua's face changed. With a chagrined look, he asked, "Where did we mess up, Young Master Lan?"

Ling Lan answered serenely, "From the very beginning."

"Huh?" Ling Hua did not understand.

"From the moment you all were late, I had begun suspecting all of you. And when you all managed to return without any injuries at all, I knew for sure." Ling Lan had never trusted the Ling family mecha squad from the very beginning.

Chapter 56

Individual Plots

The two sides faced each other in a stalemate. Although the three mecha still had their lightspeed guns trained on Ling Lan's group of three, because Ling Lan had Ling Hua at her mercy, they didn't dare to really pull their triggers, afraid that Ling Lan would kill Ling Hua in response.

On the other hand, although Ling Qin and Ling Yu really wanted to get closer to help Ling Lan control Ling Hua, the three mecha clearly knew that letting them gather together would be a bad idea, and had shot a few warning shots at their feet when they tried to move. This was a warning to not move recklessly, otherwise they would willingly choose to let everyone die altogether.

Both sides had their own concerns, so both sides dared not to make the first move...

"Why?" This stalemate gave Ling Hua the time to voice the questions he held within his heart.

"There is only one possibility why Ling family loyalists would be late to the rescue, and that is fighting to the death after being caught in an ambush — I'm sure you understand." Ever since Ling Lan had been officially taught how to read, she had blatantly started to go through all the old books and historical records preserved by the Ling family. Therefore, she was well aware of all the information pertaining to the training of the Ling family loyalists — a truly loyal Ling family loyalist would never choose to leave his master's side on his own.

In a situation like what Ling Hua described, Ling family loyalists would only choose to fight the enemy till the death, and not run away. They would definitely never allow their master to leave their sight unless they all ended up dead.

Hearing this, Ling Hua smiled coldly. "Don't you know that the Ling family has another family rule? If a new master would like the loyalists to defend him with their lives, he will have to first gain the acknowledgement of the loyalists. You think you've done this, Young Master Lan?" His lips curled into a mocking smile. Ling Lan's baseless accusations and suspicious nature were very likely to alienate others, leading to the

eventual downfall of the Ling family. This proved that he hadn't made the wrong choice — it was just a pity he had failed.

Ling Hua sighed, "Young Master Lan, this time, you were just lucky to stumble onto the truth." The goddess of luck had stood on Ling Lan's side today, while he was just unlucky. Still, he wasn't going to make things easy for Ling Lan. He continued to say, "However, you should really do something about your suspicious and distrustful nature — which family loyalist would be willing to lay down their life for you with that personality? Perhaps he might be the very next person you suspect."

Ling Hua's words caused both Ling Qin and Ling Yu's face to drain of colour. Ling Qin knew that Ling Hua was saying this just to sow the seeds of distrust within the Ling family loyalists, to prevent them from ever fully trusting in Ling Lan, making it so that Ling Lan would never be able to gain the acknowledgement of the Ling family loyalists... while Ling Yu was worried about whether he was under Ling Lan's suspicion himself.

Ling Lan had seen the change in both Ling Qin and Ling Yu's expressions — Little Four's full-scope coverage was very efficient. Nothing that happened on the scene would escape his detection, even small actions such as Ling Hua's surreptitious palming of a dagger from within his sleeve.

Ling Lan silently put up her guard, even as her lips curled up in a cool smirk, "Lucky? If your mecha had had any signs of battle on it, perhaps I might have doubted my suspicions... Unfortunately, you forgot to account for the small details. You should have compared it with Ling Yu's mecha, and added on several scrapes caused by beam shots. Perhaps then your words would have been more believable... Ah, I'm really such an overly suspicious person."

Slowly but surely, Ling Lan pointed out the mistakes Ling Hua had made in his setup. As Ling Qin heard her speak, his face became more and more wrought with emotion — so his Young Master Lan had already become so capable without his noticing... Master Ling Xiao truly had a successor now. A frisson of regret ran through Ling Qin's heart — oh, if only Young Master Lan was really a young master!

Ling Yu finally realised that what he had assumed to be the childish whims of Young Master Lan, were actually full of hidden meaning. He looked at the small body clinging to Ling Hua's back, holding Ling Hua hostage, and his eyes glittered with a strange light.

Young Master Lan was so level-headed and intelligent — as befitting her status as master. At only six years old, she was already so amazing, and it was likely that she would only grow up to be even more impressive. Awe and respect surged within Ling Yu — at this very moment, he truly recognised Ling Lan as the master he intended to serve, someone he would be willing to sacrifice his life for.

"So, you were feeling up our mecha to check for the signs of battle." Ling Hua finally understood where he had gone wrong and was filled with regret.

He couldn't believe that he had really been tricked by Ling Lan. He had thought that she was just a child, that no matter how smart she was, she wouldn't be able to see through his plot. Unexpectedly, Ling Lan was so freakishly talented that she had suspected everything from the start. Not only did he not manage to fool the other, but unknowingly, he had been drawn into the other's carefully laid plot.

Frankly, Ling Lan hadn't been sure at first who was the traitor, which was why she had plotted to take away both Ling Hua and Ling Yu's particle-beam handguns so that she could guarantee Ling Qin's and her own safety. And then, she had faked an obsession for mecha so that she could get close enough to inspect the mecha. As she touched the outer shell of the mecha, she took the opportunity to check on the condition of the mecha, which helped her to determine the true culprit.

Ling Hua chuckled bitterly. If only he had taken Ling Lan seriously from the start and treated her as an equal, he would never have let Ling Lan get close to his mecha. Then, she wouldn't have been able to discover his lie, and he wouldn't have ended up losing so terribly.

"Didn't you consider that I could just be that much stronger? The captain must be better than the regular team members after all," asked Ling Hua stubbornly.

Ling Lan was silent for a moment as she considered his point, but then replied regretfully, "Honestly, I would like to think that way as well. I really did not want to see the day the Ling family loyalists would betray the Ling family — betray me... But, you forgot the most important thing, one of our Ling family's most important house rule."

Ling Lan's voice was soft, but her words crashed into Ling Hua's ears like thunder, "While we still have strength, we are not to abandon our family. Ling Hua, it's true that the Ling family loyalists do not have to put their lives on the line before they have acknowledged the current family head. This is why I do not doubt Ling Yu's loyalty.

There are clear signs of beam damage on his mecha, some close to piercing through his cockpit. This meant that he had almost died in his fight, that he had done all that he could..." Hearing this, Ling Yu's heart warmed, and his eyes became damp instantly.

"But you are different. Your mecha has no signs of damage at all, which meant that the situation was still well within your control. Although I have not gained your acknowledgement, I'm still a member of the Ling family, still a member of your family... but in that situation, you chose to abandon me. This behaviour... what does it mean?"

Ling Hua was rendered speechless. So, he had carelessly exposed his true thoughts so easily — he had taken the six year old Ling Lan much too lightly. Deep in his heart, regret swirled. If he had known that Ling Lan was this bright, he would have just carried on honestly with his duty to protect Ling Lan. If he had not fallen for that temptation, and chosen to take this risk, perhaps his children would still be able to receive the best upbringing from the Ling family in remembrance of his hard work...

"Young Master Lan, I'm sorry. If I had only known you were such a bright child, I would not have accepted another's offer to betray you. Sadly, it's too late. I will not ask for your forgiveness, but only hope that you won't take out your anger on my family and my children — everything is my own fault." Ling Hua exhaled a quiet breath, the regret in his eyes unconcealed as he spoke with an earnest expression.

Emotionlessly, Ling Lan replied, "I never take out my anger on other people."

"Thank you, Young Master Lan!" As Ling Hua's voice rang out, the stalemate broke in a blur of violence. Ling Hua grabbed Ling Lan's hand on his throat with his own left hand, even as he flicked his right hand upwards in a vicious thrust. The dagger in his hand was aiming for Ling Lan right wrist, which was holding the particle-beam handgun to his head. That was the greatest threat to him right now, and he needed to get rid of it while Ling Lan was still unprepared.

But then, he felt a flash of heat course through his head, and all was empty... he could no longer feel his right hand — had he missed? Why wasn't his left hand holding on to that little hand at his throat?

And then he saw the scenery in his vision change, from the sight of three mecha to a sheet of endless blue... and that was his final thought.

"Captain!" A terrible wail rose up from among the three mecha.

And then the three mecha pressed down on their triggers resolutely...

Ling Qin and Ling Yu made a frenzied jump towards Ling Lan, hoping desperately that they would be able to block Ling Lan from the beam attacks.

Only Ling Lan was unmoved, staring steadily at the three mecha without even flinching.

Ling Qin and Ling Yu shoved Ling Lan roughly onto the ground, and then laid their own bodies over hers to cover her from sight completely, almost suffocating Ling Lan in the process.

Impassively, Ling Lan said, "Grandpa Ling Qin, and you too Ling Yu... you're flattening me, can you both get off me now?"

Ling Qin barked, "Just stay still and hide yourself! Even if we die, you cannot die. You're our Ling family's only hope."

Ling Yu nodded vigorously in agreement. "I'm Young Master's loyalist. To die for you is my duty and honour." That said, he pressed down on Ling Lan's head once more, as if afraid that Ling Lan would be struck by some stray attack beam. Ling Yu was rather surprised that he could survive for so long under the collective attack of three beam guns, so long that he even had time to respond to Young Master Lan.

Finally, Ling Lan could take it no longer. With a dramatic roll of her eyes, she said, "Don't you two notice that you aren't in any pain whatsoever?"

Taken aback, Ling Qin abruptly realised that it was true — why wasn't there any pain? Could it be that his entire body had been blown to smithereens until his nerves were no longer there to feel pain? Of course, he knew this was impossible, so the only possible explanation was that the opponent had not attacked...

Ling Yu had also figured it out by this time. They turned back to look and saw the three mecha just standing there, still in their attack stances, unmoving as if they had been frozen in place.

But when they looked at the middle sections of the mecha, they immediately understood — somehow, sometime, the cockpits of the three mecha had disappeared, only leaving behind three large holes.

Not too far away from the mecha, the three cockpits could be seen slowly drifting downwards on parachutes, flashing distress signals all the way. The three cockpits had obviously been set to space rescue mode — as long as no one opened the cockpits up to provide rescue from the outside, the people inside would not be able to open it.

From the looks of it, the three cockpits had been automatically set to rescue mode by the mecha and summarily ejected, causing the pilots to become trapped like fish in a bowl.

Seeing this, Ling Qin and Ling Yu were ecstatic. They quickly clambered off the ground, pulling Ling Lan up with them, and then Ling Yu ran over to check on the three cockpits to make sure the opponents were really trapped within. After all, the pilots still had weapons on them — this was not the time to take any chances.

Meanwhile, Ling Qin had walked over to stand by Ling Hua's body, sadness written all over his face. Ling Hua was the successor he had raised singlehandedly, outstanding in all respects. Whether in terms of ability or personal charisma, he was heads above all the others. All these years, as Ling Qin gradually released the reins, Ling Hua had taken on a larger role and had gradually gained the trust of the other Ling family loyalists. Slowly but surely, he was being accepted as the next leader of the Ling family loyalists.

In Ling Qin's original plans, once Ling Hua had acknowledged Ling Lan, he would relinquish his role as the leader of the loyalists and pass it on officially to Ling Hua. He had believed that, as long as Ling Hua took good care of Ling Lan, the glory days of the Ling family would continue. So, even when he died, he would be able to face the previous two family heads proudly in the afterlife.

He would never have guessed in a million years that the successor he had chosen and raised so carefully would betray them, breaking his heart and chilling it in equal measure.

Ling Hua, what in the world could have persuaded you to betray Ling Lan — to betray the Ling family? Could there possibly be someone else like you in the Ling family?

Chapter 57

The Still Unresolved Fear of Heights!

"Little Four, this time is all thanks to you." With a face full of gratitude, Ling Lan looked at the smugly wriggling Little Four in the learning space. If it hadn't been for him, no matter how alert she was or how much she tried to prepare, the result would have been the same — the overwhelming strength of a weaponised mecha was not something her strategies could counter, meaning that they actually had no chance of winning.

The reason Ling Lan had blabbered on for so long with Ling Hua, was to buy time for Little Four to infiltrate the mecha's A.I. and wrest control. Although Little Four was like a god in the virtual world, the natural enemy of all A.I., the A.I. of the mecha was not like the low-level goods installed in the hover cars. For Little Four to gain control, he still needed to expend quite a bit of effort. Of course, after gaining this experience, it wouldn't take this long to hack into common standard mecha next time, unless the mecha was of a higher level.

Besides that, Ling Lan had also wanted to take the chance to reveal Ling Hua's true colours to Ling Qin and Ling Yu, as well as lay out the reasons for calling him a traitor. She knew very well that if misunderstandings and grudges were not removed early, after festering to a certain extent, the consequences could be disastrous, and she had no intention of making such a low-level mistake.

After examining the three cockpits, Ling Yu bounded back excitedly, and asked Ling Lan, "Young Master Lan, what should we do next?"

Ling Yu had already acknowledged Ling Lan, fixating on her as his lifelong master, so his first instinct was to look to Ling Lan for instruction.

"Contact home and ask them to send more people over. Bring these people back for interrogation, and find out who exactly is the one who is after me, and after the Ling Clan." Ling Lan had not forgotten about that locked-down hover car Little Four had parked at the wayside — perhaps the people inside knew something useful.

"Yes, Young Master Lan!" If it wasn't for the fact that Young Master Lan was not yet

sixteen years old, and as such not able to officially accept the position of family head, Ling Yu would have really liked to call her 'Master'.

That's right, Ling Yu had already imprinted on Ling Lan for this life — so even if Master Ling Xiao came back to life, his loyalty would not change. Of course, the current Ling Yu did not know that he would really face this extremely difficult dilemma in the future...

With a heavy heart, Ling Qin walked back to stand by them. Even without looking at his heavy steps, Ling Lan knew that Ling Hua's death was a great blow to the old chamberlain who had served the Ling family for three generations. After all, within these last six years, Ling Qin had spoken of Ling Hua's excellence more than once with unreserved pride. Yet, it was this same person that he had been so proud of that had betrayed the Ling family, betrayed him... this caused Ling Qin to lose faith his own judgement.

Frankly, Ling Lan's ready suspicion of Ling Hua had a lot to do with Chamberlain Ling Qin's constant mentions of Ling Hua around her. Because, according to Ling Qin, Ling Hua was just too outstanding — so outstanding that it was impossible for him to commit such a low-level mistake and delay rescue. So really, a person should never stand out too much. Doing so would make people remember you, so whenever you decide to drag your feet to cause a bit of mischief, the jarring difference between your performance then and now would easily expose your intentions. If Ling Hua ever found out that this was the reason behind his failure, he would probably deeply regret how brilliantly he had shone before this day.

Ling Lan didn't know what she could say to console the sad old man before her. She had never been good at consoling others. That was why she had decided to always face her loved ones with a smile in her previous life, just so her parents wouldn't worry. Still, history had proven that this method of hers was useless. Although her parents would keep smiling in front of her, they would always cry later in places where she couldn't see — but her ears were sharp, so she had still heard it all. (Due to her high spiritual power, her five senses were also N-times more sensitive than an average person's.)

Ling Lan believed that for someone to forget their grief, that person should be kept busy. Wasn't it said that time was the best medicine? She was sure she had read it in a book somewhere... In any case, regardless of whether it works, she would just go ahead and use it for now. She lifted her hands to clasp Ling Qin's hands in hers, and

asked, "The hover car is gone. How are we going to get to school?"

Well, alright, so Ling Lan hadn't forgotten the purpose of their trip today. Today was the first day of school for her — Ling Lan didn't want to become that one student who was late on the first day and become the focus of attention that way. Ling Hua's bloody end had driven the lesson home that it wasn't a good thing to stand out and be remembered.

When Ling Qin heard Ling Lan's question, he immediately rallied himself. That's right, now wasn't the time to grieve! He must not allow Ling Lan to be marked down for being late — this black mark would definitely hold Ling Lan back when she applied to the various major military schools in the future. Ling Qin was very ambitious — he was already imagining Ling Lan's entrance into the Federation's strongest number one boys' military school...

Alright, so Ling Lan's true gender had slipped his mind for the moment — please forgive an old man for his random fit of Alzheimer's!

Without even thinking about it, Ling Qin decided that he would pilot Ling Hua's mecha to send Ling Lan to the Central Scout Academy. As for those traitors and assassins, he would leave them to the reluctant Ling Yu, who really wished he could switch places with Ling Qin.

Looking on as Ling Qin flew away with Ling Lan as a passenger on the mecha, Ling Yu's face was glum as he whined internally. *Boo hoo hoo! How I wish I could personally send Young Master Lan to school...*

The mournful Ling Yu could only vent his surging resentment on the few assassins within the hover car. Before they left, Little Four had already unlocked the car door, but for safety reasons, he had destroyed the A.I. on board to disable its weaponry. As for the old-school particle-beam handguns, they were basically useless against mecha, so the assassins didn't even dare to try and resist, obediently giving themselves up. Even so, they were almost roasted. Ling Yu used the beam gun on his mecha to herd them, and even though the beams had just grazed by their bodies, the intense heat of the shots had still left serious burn damage on them, leaving them one step away from being cooked.

Thus, by the time another batch of Ling family loyalists arrived, the assassins looked at them as if they were their saviours, so moved that they almost wanted to cling to the loyalists' feet and cry.

Dammit, even if they were assassins, and now prisoners, that didn't mean they deserved to be tortured! What happened to human rights?

The moment Ling Lan entered the cockpit, she found out how a mecha carried a passenger. It turned out that behind the control seat of the mecha, between the seat and the wall of the cockpit, there was a small space. It was large enough to hold a grown person of roughly 150 catties ¹, but of course it wasn't as comfortable as the pilot control seat, and could perhaps even be considered a little cramped.

Of course, for a child like Ling Lan, this space was still rather large, almost enough for Ling Lan to move around freely inside.

Closing the cockpit door, the lights dimmed, and Ling Qin quickly pressed the A.I. activation button to light up the cockpit once again.

"A.I. activated. Checking in progress. Please wait! To select emergency activation, please press the emergency activation button!" The A.I. reminded as part of its activation procedure.

There were two ways to activate a mecha — one was the regular activation, which was a little slow, requiring about 1 to 3 minutes, while the other was the emergency activation, whose activation time correlated with the level of the A.I... The higher the level of the A.I., the less time it took to activate. The A.I. of this type of common standard mecha required between 12 to 15 seconds.

Captain level mecha could shorten this time till about 10 to 12 seconds, and moving upwards, each level higher could shorten that time by another 2 to 3 seconds. At the top, the Federation's ultimate weapons, the IN mecha, could truly achieve 0-second activation, which was one of the reasons why they were considered the strongest mecha.

Of course, Ling Qin did not choose the option of emergency activation this time. Although Ling Lan ran the risk of being late, the situation was not so dire that they had to use emergency activation.

Although emergency activation could save time, it had a fatal weakness — it would skip the process of checking the functionality of all its parts and weapons. Mecha, as finely-calibrated combat machines, would accumulate damage to its various parts in every battle. And when a particular part reached its breaking point and stopped functioning as it should, if the pilot decided that day to use emergency activation... predictably, it would all end in tragedy. The only question being the scale of the tragedy.

Naturally, Ling Qin would not let Ling Lan risk this kind of danger, so he took the regular path of regular activation.

This time, the activation process did not require the full 3 minutes, completing itself in 2 minutes and 10 seconds, logging them onto the main mecha control system.

However, this sort of activation speed drew Little Four's contempt — within the learning space, he was jumping around agitatedly, loudly complaining about how this sort of tortoise-like speed was literally akin to murdering the mecha operator. If it weren't for Ling Lan's quick and vehement objection, Little Four would have already forced his way into the mecha to begin modifying the A.I...

Still, Ling Lan promised Little Four that once she obtained her own mecha, she would definitely let Little Four take charge of the A.I. — it would be up to him completely how he would like to modify it. Only then did Little Four subside reluctantly, agreeing to wait till the day he could show off what he could do.

Swiftly, Ling Qin turned on the mecha's omnidirectional display function, which immediately immersed them in what Ling Lan felt to be like a virtual world. It seemed like she was sitting on a floating seat, looking down at the ground from a height of 5 to 6 metres.

Yep, this feeling isn't half bad! Ling Lan watched with enraptured eyes as Ling Qin piloted the mecha, finding the entire process fascinating. She was a little eager to try it herself, starting to look forward to the day she could pilot her own mecha.

Ling Qin grabbed hold of the control stick, and turned his head briefly to caution, "Young Master Lan, sit tight, I'm about to take off."

Ling Lan nodded and held on tightly to the armrest beside her, indicating that she was ready.

Receiving confirmation from Ling Lan, Ling Qin's hands flew rapidly over the controls — all Ling Lan knew was that within a split second, Ling Qin had gone through approximately 20 different motions.

From the outside, the mecha Ling Qin was controlling was seen to bend its knees, and then it sprang upwards. Simultaneously, the two main engines below the waist section of the mecha rumbled to life, generating an immense propulsion force, sending the mecha flying forwards into the air.

The abrupt movement of the mecha caused Ling Lan's body to be pressed down securely into her seat by the opposing gravity. Fortunately, Ling Lan's physical condition was good enough that it didn't feel particularly uncomfortable.

Although the cockpit had a certain degree of decompression capability, for the sake of better sense control for the pilot, it didn't eliminate this sort of inertia. This was yet another reason why mecha operators needed to have strong physical bodies. Research had proven that, without the existence of pressure, operators were unable to sense the movements of the mecha — they were unable to confirm whether their movements were being projected accurately, and thus couldn't achieve the precision needed to execute the movements they wanted up to proper standards.

Soon, the mecha had entered airspace and had begun flying swiftly towards its destination. Due to the projection of the omnidirectional display, Ling Lan had the false perception that she was sitting on an untethered chair, weaving swiftly through the blue skies and fluffy white clouds...

All Ling Lan could hear was a persistent buzzing in her ears, and then... she blacked out.

Before she fainted, she finally remembered — she still hadn't gotten over her fear of heights yet!

Noooooo ~~~ what about my dream of piloting a mecha?!!! Ling Lan was weeping piteously at Little Four within the learning space. In return, Little Four was driven into a frenzy — if Ling Lan did not manage to overcome this problem, how would he ever get the chance to modify a mecha's A.I.?

Chapter 58

A Familiar Totem!

Early that morning, the main entrance of the Central Scout Academy was already bustling with people. Countless hover cars weaved through the air — if the local government hadn't taken the proper precautions by sending out police forces to maintain order, the traffic would most likely have jammed up and several collisions might even have occurred...

It couldn't be helped, as there were just too many cars. Every year, almost ten thousand students enrolled in this scout academy, and the parents of the students who were only allowed to go home on off days every week were out in full force. They were the main culprit behind the unusual congregation of hover cars in the air today.

After all, only the top hundred kids who qualified for the special classes had the right to be day students ¹, and could freely choose the courses they were interested in. The other children had no choice but to accept the school's arrangements to live on campus and were only allowed to go home on off days every week.

However, these children could still change their fate — every year, there were two chances to enter the special classes. To encourage competitive spirit in the children, the Central Scout Academy would rerank the entire school every six months. It didn't matter if you were in the special classes, the merit classes, or the regular classes, no one was exempt, and only those who managed to rank within the top hundred would be taken into the special classes for the next six months.

Of course, for the children from the merit classes and the regular classes to score within the top hundred and enter the special classes... although it couldn't be said that no one succeeded, the chances of it happening were highly unlikely, rarer than rare ². From the beginning, the children from the special classes would receive education and resources far beyond the means of the regular classes; half a month's time was more than enough time for the gap between them and the children from the other classes to grow exponentially.

Nevertheless, this was still considered a sort of fairness mechanism — a chance given by the school for those children in the merit and regular classes to break through their

limits and reach for the stars ³ — whether the children succeeded in doing so depended solely on them.

On one of the fields of the scout academy, Qi Long, Han Jijyun and his cousin Han Xuya, as well as the twin siblings Luo Lang and Luo Chao, were gathered together. They were peering out into the sky with their heads lifted as if searching for something.

They had arrived at the scout academy bright and early that morning. Ever since they had found out that they had qualified for the special classes, they had been filled with anticipation for the first day of school.

That's right, the final results confirmed that all five of them had been grouped into the special classes. Qi Long, Han Jijyun, and Luo Chao had all entered Special Class-A, while the two girls had successfully entered Special Class-B. This result had sent the girls into joyous fits — none of the adults had expected much of them at first, predicting that it was more likely for them to end up in Merit Class-1. So when the results came out, the two girls had been smug about it for weeks.

Besides that, Luo Shaoyun and Yuan Youyun, who had taken the exam with them, had also managed to rank within the top hundred, successfully becoming members of Special Class-B. And while the final two people in their exam group had scored a little weaker, they had still got into Merit Class-1, which was the top class right after the special classes.

Han Xuya and Luo Chao knew in their hearts that these exemplary results were all thanks to Boss Ling Lan. (Since their elder brothers had already recognised him as their boss, of course they'd choose to follow suit.) However, they also knew that it was all up to them from this point onwards — they really did not want to be the first students to drop out from the special classes.

"Qi Long, you still haven't found Boss' hover car?" chubby-girl Han Xuya asked Qi Long rudely.

Han Jijyun marked her tone and frowned. He really disliked the way his cousin sister ordered Qi Long around; she shouldn't lose her manners just because they were familiar. This character of his cousin's made it very easy for her to offend others without even knowing it.

Qi Long did not respond, not because he was angry or anything, but just because he

was too lazy to deal with Han Xuya. He just kept his eyes glued to the sky, but sadly, he still saw nothing.

Seeing how Qi Long was ignoring her, Han Xuya was a little ticked off. But just as she was about to say something about it, she saw her elder cousin brother glaring at her, so she could only swallow her words resentfully. What could she do? Her parents had told her to listen to Han Jijyun in all things at school.

Finally, Qi Long could take it no longer. He reeled back his gaze, rubbed his hands over his tired eyes, and said helplessly, "No sight of that hover car Boss was riding before..."

Luo Lang jeered, "Calling someone 'boss' yet forgetting to get his contact number — tsk, only you."

It turned out that, in his excitement back then, Qi Long had forgotten the most important thing — to exchange contact information with Ling Lan. As such, now he could do nothing but keep scouring the skies with his eyes for any sign of Ling Lan's hover car among the countless other hover cars in the sky.

Qi Long threw an unimpressed glance at Luo Lang, retorting, "Didn't you forget too?" Who was he to criticize him when they were the same?

"You..." Qi Long had hit Luo Lang right where it hurt, riling up the boy once again.

Han Jijyun rubbed his forehead in consternation and began to play mediator. "Ok, ok, since we've all acknowledged the same person as our boss, we're all on the same boat now. We should be a bit more united, to avoid giving Boss Lan any trouble."

Perhaps Han Jijyun's phrasing of 'giving Boss Lan trouble' was effective, for the two troublemakers subsided, although they both still sniffed loudly once before turning away to ignore each other.

Han Jijyun smiled wryly to himself. These two were certainly a handful — looks like their issues could only be resolved once Boss Ling Lan gets here to force them to get along. Alright, so the one who had always been watching out for Qi Long, Han Jijyun, had also learned how to shift responsibilities, summarily deciding that these two troublemakers were Ling Lan's problem now.

At that moment, a loud siren rang out through the Central Scout Academy!

This siren was to warn everyone present that some weaponised force had entered the outer perimeter of the Central Scout Academy.

Heavens, who would be so daring as to attack Doha's Central Scout Academy? Did they not know that the school had a squad of military mecha in permanent residence?

Before Qi Long, Luo Lang, and the others could react, a dark grey mecha could be seen approaching rapidly from the horizon. Its imposing large body, as well as the two giant beam sabres on its back, sent tremors of fear running down the back of anyone who saw it.

However, the Central Scout Academy also responded quickly — six blue-white mecha had already appeared to fly forward to meet the dark grey mecha.

The only reason they didn't just open fire was that the signal being transmitted by the dark grey mecha registered as friendly, but they still couldn't afford to drop their guard.

Watching this, the children on the ground were slack-jawed and wide-eyed with wonder. Some of them had never seen a federal mecha before — at most, they had seen pictures, or even 3D animations — and while others may have seen the real thing before, they had still never seen a real battle between real airborne mecha.

Regardless, all the children here shared one thing in common. All of their eyes had lighted up at the sight of the mecha, glittering and bright. Unquestionably, they had been utterly captivated by the formidable figures of the mecha.

In contrast, the adults surrounding the children were in no mood to admire the mecha — if that dark grey mecha turned out to be an enemy, they knew that they were in grave danger. The power of mecha was truly horrifying — not only were their equipped weapons fearsome, the mecha itself was fearsome. Their self-destruct sequence before death was not something a normal person could withstand. Even just standing here, they could be drawn into the path of its destruction.

However, the following events helped to settle the fears of everyone there. The six mecha seemed to have reached an agreement with the dark grey mecha, and soon, under the escort of the six mecha, the dark grey mecha had landed at a designated landing spot.

Right then, Qi Long suddenly asked Han Jijun, "Jyun, the picture on the dark grey

mecha's chest — doesn't it look familiar? I feel like I've seen it somewhere before."

Han Jijyun was already on the case. He felt that vague sense of familiarity too, so when he heard Qi Long's question, he nodded and said, "Yes, you're right, it *is* familiar. I'm sure we've seen it somewhere before... could it be one of the elite families we know?"

The dark grey colour of the mecha meant that it was a privately-owned mecha, and totems were the favoured symbols by elite families to represent themselves — Han Jijyun's thoughts naturally led in that direction.

Luo Lang, however, was derisive of their actions. In his opinion, it was just an exceptionally ordinary red bird. There were so many elite families within the Federation, large and small, and there were plenty among them who used totems similar to this one. Perhaps they had seen something similar to this before somewhere, hence the sense of familiarity.

Han Jijyun and Qi Long searched their memories but came up with nothing. None of the elite families close to them used anything similar to this totem, so where could they have seen this before?

And then, Luo Chao, who had been standing to one side, spoke up softly, her entire face blushing red, "On Boss Ling Lan's hover car, I think I saw something very similar."

"Ah!" The three boys gaped in surprise; Luo Chao's words were just too unexpected.

Han Jijyun was especially troubled. Could it be that he and Qi Long had also seen it then, but hadn't registered it consciously? Instead, had their subconscious remembered it, resulting in this strange sense of familiarity?

On the other hand, Qi Long had immediately cast away all his doubts after Luo Chao's words. Since he had the answer now, he wasn't going to waste any more effort thinking about it.

Luo Chao was frightened by the response of the three boys, and had immediately scampered like a rabbit to hide behind Han Xuya, and refused to say another word after that.

"Sister, come here, come here. Come tell your elder brother how you know that Boss Lan's hover car has this picture on it?" With a face full of pleasant surprise, Luo Lang hurried to call his sister out for a detailed explanation.

Seeing everyone's attention on her, Luo Chao became even shyer, replying in a low voice, "I wanted to know more about Boss Lan, so I paid special attention to the car that came to pick him up."

And there was the answer. When it came to a boy she liked, a girl would be willing to dig three feet deep just to find out everything she could about the other, and the bashful little Luo Chao was no different than any other girl in this respect.

Luo Lang felt a pang of sourness in his heart. Was the little sister he had grown up with going to be taken away by another just like that? No way. Even though he had submitted to Ling Lan, that didn't mean that he would just give up his little sister on a silver platter... Luo Lang silently determined that he would think of a way to minimise contact between Boss Lan and his sister. He wouldn't allow his own precious baby sister to be snatched away by someone else — not even Boss Lan.

Han Jijyun did not spare a thought for Luo Lang's internal conflict; he watched the dark grey mecha land safely, then turned on the communicator on his wrist.

"Aiya, so you finally remember me, Master! May I know how I can help you?" An extremely sweet and pretty voice could be heard coming from the device, its tone flirty and playful.

This prompted the Luo twins to turn around with curious looks, because Han Jijyun's communicator was clearly different from theirs, actually containing an intelligent system. Theirs just had boring selection buttons, not personable whatsoever.

On the other hand, Qi Long and Han Xuya were already used to it, and so remained impassive. Han Jijyun had always liked to fiddle with this sort of little curios, and had actually managed to piece together this one functional little gadget over the years.

Chapter 59

Freaktastic Boss!

"Expand search range," ordered Han Jijyun.

"Ok!" Very quickly, a bird's-eye view of the Central Scout Academy had appeared on his communicator's virtual screen, displaying the image of the entire Central Scout Academy within the confines of the screen. Of course, the image was clear enough that they could see the landing spot chosen by the mecha.

Han Jijyun tapped lightly on the landing spot on the virtual screen, and the screen automatically zoomed in as close as it could to the tapped location.

Han Jijyun adjusted the viewing angle slightly, and soon, a dark grey mecha was presented in all its glory before the children. Its entirely metallic outer plating shone with the dark gleam unique to mecha, while on its chest area, a large red bird with outstretched wings on the brink of flight rested, its entire body wreathed in flames, shining with exceptional brightness in the morning sunlight.

Although the mecha had no visible heavy weapons (if it had, it would have been shot down by the Central Scout Academy's defensive missiles before it could even get near the school), the two giant beam sabers strapped on its back were more than enough on their own to emphasize its might. It should be known that a normal mecha would have just one small beam saber as its standard weapon, but this mecha had two giant beam sabers instead — it was clear to see that the operator of this mecha was an extremely talented close combat mecha specialist.

This clearly customized weapon, so different from the weapons of common standard mecha, made Qi Long and Luo Lang's eyes burn with want. It couldn't be helped. Mecha, as high-grade weaponised equipment of the Federation, were banned goods that could not be purchased by the public. The children had almost no chance of seeing the real thing close up — only getting a glimpse through video screens, or even just learning about them through illustrations.

Only if they were direct descendants of some major elite family, or perhaps the offspring of some high-ranking military officer (N-th generation military), then they

might have a chance of coming in contact with a mecha.

"Eh? Has the cockpit of the dark grey mecha opened?" Luo Lang's sharp eyes caught the difference on the virtual screen.

"Looks like it. What a shame the image is still a little small so we can't see it clearly," said Qi Long with some regret.

Without saying a word, Han Jijyun threw a scornful glance at the two of them. He didn't mock them, however, only zooming in once more onto the dark grey mecha, fixing the display on the cockpit.

Sure enough, the dark grey mecha's cockpit was already open, and they could see a small child climbing out from inside with his head lowered.

"Why does this person look so familiar?" Qi Long was a little slow on the uptake.

This question drew the contempt of both Luo Lang and Han Jijyun — hells, this fool was the first one to rush up to acknowledge him as boss and now he can't even recognise him?

At the sight of the little figure, Luo Chao, who was standing beside them, had blushed bright red even as her eyes sparkled. It looked as if she had recognised who the person was as well. Meanwhile, Han Xuya was the only person who wasn't looking at the virtual image, for all her attention was on Qi Long.

Right then, the child in the image finally raised his head.

"Holy sh*t, it's Boss Lan!" Qi Long finally recognised the person, and couldn't help but yell out in excitement, "That's awesome, actually riding a mecha to school! Hail Boss!"

Right now, Qi Long's respect for Ling Lan was surging endlessly like the waters of a river after rain. Dammit, tell him, who else could be as freaktastic as his boss?

Qi Long wasn't the only one taken in completely — even Luo Lang had lost the heart to compete with Ling Lan at this point. The distance between the two of them was just too goddamn wide, wasn't it? Just think, here they were drooling over the mecha on the screen, when Ling Lan had already gotten to use a mecha as mere transportation... where was the humanity?! Fine, he should just quit comparing himself against a non-human being and save himself some grief.

Luo Lang had been enlightened — he decided he would not waste any time trying to steal Boss Ling Lan's position; it would be wiser to just faithfully do his duty as a follower. Perhaps then he might even be able to ask Boss Lan to let them touch the mecha... Thinking of this, Luo Lang's blood boiled, and his eyes shined with a dazzling light.

Yep, the perks of being his follower may not be half bad.

In contrast, Han Jijyun's expression was rather troubled. His face was stiff and closed-off, and a question had lodged itself within his mind — who exactly was Ling Lan? Coming here by mecha... although that was also shocking to Han Jijyun, it wasn't as impactful as it was for Qi Long and the others. What shocked Han Jijyun more was the response and attitude of the Central Scout Academy.

Qi Long, Luo Lang, and the others may not know what all this meant, but Han Jijyun knew. Piloting a mecha into the heavily guarded Central Scout Academy was a suicidal act. And usually, continuing on after a warning had been given would definitely result in a merciless barrage of fire, until the mecha had been shot down. This scenario, where six mecha were sent out to escort it instead, was something that shouldn't have happened. Of course, the six mecha were there in part to monitor and dictate the landing of said mecha, but still, no matter what, what happened today was definitely not normal. It looked like Ling Lan's family background carried some weight.

During their enrolment test, Ling Lan's exceptional perceptivity, logical reasoning, and combat prowess had gained the sincere admiration of Han Jijyun. Which is why when his good mate Qi Long had chosen to acknowledge Ling Lan as his boss, Han Jijyun had not objected. However, now it seemed like there were some issues surrounding Ling Lan's identity — he would need some time to think about this, about whether acknowledging Ling Lan as their boss would have any negative repercussions for Qi Long and himself...

Han Jijyun still remembered what his father, the Head of the Federal Intelligence Agency, had once taught him — be wary of anyone who got close to him, even children, for in their position, it was far too easy to become ensnared in some other's plot, and end up being used as a pawn...

Descending from the mecha via a halyard, Ling Lan's feet once again met solid ground,

and her heart could finally settle.

Still, now wasn't the time to rejoice just yet. She needed to control the muscles of her two legs so they wouldn't tremble — as a member of Special Class-A pinned with high expectations, she couldn't afford to expose her weakness against heights.

Ling Lan took in a deep breath to calm herself before forcing out a stiff smile, and turned to wave goodbye to Chamberlain Ling Qin in the cockpit. Chamberlain Ling Qin could no longer accompany her into the school to handle the registration procedures; the school was not going to allow a mecha which could threaten the safety of the children to remain on school grounds for long.

Aware of the vigilant stares of the six mecha beside him, Ling Qin knew there was no point in delaying. So, he piloted the mecha and left reluctantly under the watchful guard of the six mecha. The reason Ling Qin could leave so simply without protest was that he knew there was nowhere safer than the Central Scout Academy. Their safety measures were even more impressive than that of the Ling family's, so he was completely at ease leaving Ling Lan in their care.

Ling Qin knew that it wasn't wise to linger — if by any chance this issue was manipulated by the Ling family's enemies, the Ling family would be in deep trouble. The current Ling family was no longer the Ling family during the time of Master Ling Xiao — the influence they wielded then and their impenetrable strength had disappeared completely. At the heart of the matter, it was because there was no individual mighty enough support the family. Since Young Master Lan was really just too young, not yet able to withstand the storms of life, they had no choice but to keep a low profile for now and bide their time.

Ling Lan watched as Ling Qin and his escort of six mecha departed, before looking around curiously. The spot she had landed in was a small wooded copse. There was hardly anyone else around, and it was very secluded, but it had plenty of space to support the landing of one mecha. No wonder the six mecha had directed them here to land — it was also a good place if they needed to dispose of any bodies...

In the midst of her wild thoughts, Ling Lan chose a direction at random and started walking. She was prepared to keep walking until she got out of the woods and found someone to point her towards the registration area for new students.

Since she had confirmed that this location was very secluded, Ling Lan was calm. As

long as no one knew she had arrived in a mecha, then there wouldn't be any negative impact on her academic life here. She would still be the totally mediocre genius Ling Lan submerged among the throng of other geniuses.

Seeing Ling Lan on her way out, Han Jijyun shut down his communicator, and turned to tell Qi Long and the others, "Let's go welcome Boss Lan."

Right now, Han Jijyun's mind was clear. From the start, all the kids in their exam group had not revealed their backgrounds, so they really did not know who Ling Lan's parents were, nor which system he came from. However, Ling Lan also didn't know anything about them either, so they were still on even ground. If he only started worrying about Ling Lan's true identity now, that would be rather narrow-minded of him. So, Han Jijyun wisely decided to let the matter rest.

As for whether Ling Lan was a person worthy of befriending, they had plenty of time to judge that for themselves, so there was no hurry. Han Jijyun decided to take a neutral stance and observe from the sidelines for now.

Qi Long was the first to respond to Han Jijyun's suggestion. "Alright! I'm going to ask Boss Lan later if I can take a ride on that mecha." Qi Long's excitement was palpable when talking about the mecha.

Although Luo Lang didn't say anything to that, the glint of greed in his eyes left no doubt in the others' minds that he was in agreement with Qi Long on this matter.

Han Jijyun opened his mouth, as if wanting to say something in response to Qi Long, but quickly closed it again. A thought flashed through his mind — perhaps he could use Qi Long's questioning to get a better idea of Ling Lan's personality...

Ling Lan had been walking for roughly half an hour when she suddenly saw the vague outlines of some buildings in the distance. Ling Lan's heart leapt up joyously — she was finally getting out of these woods!

And then, Ling Lan abruptly frowned, and her right hand slipped casually into her pocket, gripping hold of the miniature particle-beam handgun she had taken from her family's hover car previously.

Meanwhile, under her clothes, Ling Lan's nerves and muscles pulled taut — if Ling Lan sensed any danger at all, both the particle-beam gun in her hand and her prepped body would be able to spring to her defence instantly against any ambusher.

"Boss, we've finally found you!" Qi Long's voice boomed out from the edge of the woods.

Ling Lan's face could not help but darken instantly. Sullenly, she thought to herself: Why did she have to meet up with this fellow right when she entered the school? She had never wanted to be a boss or gather any followers — this was obviously contradictory to her personal setting of 'mediocrity'!

Just as Ling Lan was wondering whether she could get away with pretending not to hear him, or perhaps avoid him by turning in a different direction, Qi Long and his group of five were already sprinting towards her.

Well, dodging was out of the question. She sighed, and her right hand slipped out naturally from her pocket. Then, she turned and waved listlessly at Qi Long and the others. At the same time, her tightly coiled body loosened up. Against these companions who took the test with her, she really couldn't keep her guard up.

"Boss, you were just too freaktastic earlier! Actually riding a mecha to school!" The moment Qi Long opened his mouth, Ling Lan's beautiful plans were smashed.

"Who else knows?" Ling Lan glared fiercely at Qi Long, wanting him to explain fully. If it really turned out that everyone had already found out, then she would have to completely reconsider how she would portray herself to the public.

Chapter 60

Group 072 Gathers!

"Only we know," Han Jijyun was the first to respond.

Ling Lan's expression eased immediately; things weren't that bad then. Right now, Ling Lan still hadn't noticed that she had actually already accepted these few children into her heart, which was why she was unconcerned that they knew about this situation.

Han Jijyun was carefully observing Ling Lan's expressions. He smiled a subtle smile — Ling Lan's reaction pleased him because it meant that he had also acknowledged them in return.

Qi Long, Luo Lang, and the others were not as meticulous and contemplative as Han Jijyun. Brimming with excitement, they surrounded Ling Lan and started bombarding her with curious questions about how it felt to ride a mecha.

Facing these questions, Ling Lan was a little embarrassed. She was at a loss on how to answer since she couldn't very well say she was unconscious for most of the flight.

No way. To protect her glorious image, she definitely could not let this weakness of hers be exposed.

Vaguely, Ling Lan said, "When you all get the chance to ride one yourself, then you'll understand."

Hearing this, Qi Long and the others were naturally disappointed, which made Ling Lan feel bad for being so flip towards these children who admired her. So, she added, "There are some things that, if told to you by others, will always belong to them — you must experience these things yourself for them to belong to you."

These words sounded deep, and as if coming to some realisation, Qi Long and the other children's eyes lit up. Once again, they were taken in by Ling Lan, who had spouted such profound words with such flair.

Seeing the idolisation on these children's faces — even the intelligent Han Jijyun's eyes were shining with pleasant surprise — Ling Lan's heart wavered as she sweated internally.

She had never intended to deceive children! How was it that she had once again raised the level of idolisation these children had for her?

Finally, Qi Long, Luo Lang, and the others dropped the topic of mecha, and began chatting about what they all did at home after the test. All of them had trained; it looked like Ling Lan had truly inspired them.

When Ling Lan was asked about his activities for the past month, they unexpectedly saw his face turn white, before he said listlessly, "What else could it be like — I was training, just like the rest of you."

Luo Lang and Han Jijyun could just tell that that training he mentioned was not ordinary, otherwise Ling Lan wouldn't have such a traumatized look on his face. Only Qi Long remained clueless and continued to pester Ling Lan for details.

Weakly, Ling Lan replied, "I was experiencing death, in various forms... Would you like to try?"

Ling Lan's words, said in an eerie dead tone, sent chills running across Qi Long's body. No matter how brash he was typically, this time he dared not say anything more. Moreover, even Luo Lang and Han Jijyun distanced themselves from Ling Lan, afraid of being dragged in as well. They had no doubt that what Ling Lan said was true... because they could already feel the malevolent aura seeping from Ling Lan's body. This wasn't something that could be achieved through just normal training.

Very quickly, Ling Lan and the others had finished registering and had set their study schedule. As Ling Lan had chosen to be a day student, she had tried her best to squeeze all her classes together. Unfortunately, even so, she only managed to keep Wednesday free, as several of the classes required attendance for consecutive days, making it unavoidable. Next, they went to the logistics department to collect two sets of tailored uniforms each.

As today was just the registration day, the school did not arrange any classes yet, merely allowing the students to wander around campus to familiarize themselves

with the surroundings and the facilities. Ling Lan also took the chance to tour Qi Long, Luo Lang, and Han Jijyun's shared dorm. Although special class students could choose to be day students, almost none of the special class students would choose to do so. As such, this privilege was considered by the students of the Central Scout Academy to be the most pointless and pretentious privilege ever.

The three boys were assigned the same living quarters, a villa just for the three of them. More precisely, all Special Class-A students would be assigned a villa when they chose to board at the school. This was one of the perks of being a member of Special Class-A.

The villa was rather luxurious, and it was *free*. The kitchen and living room was well-equipped, and aside from the three bedrooms, there was a training room, a gym, and specialised login pods for the children to enter the academy's virtual reality system.

The Federation was very strict when it came to minors' access to virtual reality. Any child below the age of sixteen was only allowed restricted login. Meanwhile, young children who hadn't entered scout academies did not even have the right to enter virtual realities, and could only browse web pages on a screen.

However, once the children entered a scout academy, it meant that they were now allowed to access virtual realities. Of course, this access was limited — they were only allowed to log into the closed virtual reality of the scout academies. There, the only people they could interact with were teachers and other students of the scout academy. They could receive guidance from teachers there, or have a virtual spar with the other scout academy students, but that was it. This was protection provided by the school, to prevent the children from premature contact with the complicated world of adults, which could influence their growth and development.

The conditions of the villa were top-notch. Luxury and comfort, combined with a high level of integrated technology — Ling Lan was overcome with envy, almost wishing that she could board at school after all.

As for the living quarters of the two girls, Ling Lan and the boys did not go over to look. Although the children were still small, they already knew enough to distinguish between the sexes and knew that it wasn't right for boys to simply enter the girls' dorms.

By the time the two girls were done settling in and returned to meet up with them, it

was already time for lunch. Qi Long magnanimously declared that he would treat them to lunch for today.

With the commoner mentality of never passing up a free meal, Ling Lan quickly agreed, even though the amount of credits she had personally was staggering. These past few years, Little Four had become a famous online writer — rumour had it that he had N-many crazed fans supporting him — and although Little Four would purchase some gene agent every once in a while, it hardly made a dent in the amount of credits Ling Lan had.

The scout academy's canteen was very large, taking up a full several thousand square metres. Everywhere you turned, there were food options for the children's selection — it was a dazzling smorgasbord of any variety of food you could imagine.

Qi Long, Luo Lang, and Han Jijyun were all descendants of mid- to high- rank military families, certainly not the type to lack for money. Since he had decided to treat, of course he must treat the best available! After asking one of the teachers on duty, Qi Long grandly led the way to a particular corner of the canteen. It was said that the food there was the most delicious and exquisite, naturally with a suitably steep price.

When Ling Lan saw the random dishes of several thousand credits per platter, she felt that she should really rebuild Qi Long's value system. Ling Lan had already found out the value of credits in this world. One credit was roughly equivalent to one Chinese yuan in her previous world, which meant that even the cheapest dishes before her now was easily one thousand yuan each... they weren't eating *food*, they were eating money!

Ling Lan was determined. From now on, she would hold onto the money of all these babes — she just couldn't allow them to be so wasteful anymore.

Consequently, all the allowance of the five children were confiscated by Ling Lan, who only gave them 1000 credits each from that. Of course, they could ask for more if they spent it all, but they would need to report what they spent it on, and if any wastefulness was discovered... The five children had no idea what the consequences would be, since Ling Lan didn't tell them, but the cold smile on Ling Lan's face told them that it would not be good.

Han Jijyun had no objection to all this. Although he didn't know why Ling Lan would care so much about the way they spent money, he believed that Ling Lan had no ill

intentions, and may perhaps even have some profound motivation for his actions... could it be that he wanted them to become more independent? At that thought, Han Jijyun visibly lightened up.

Er... that was the problem with intelligent children, they would always think too much. Ling Lan really wasn't thinking much about it at all — she just felt that the way they spent was too wasteful. Although Ling Lan was also able to be wasteful now if she wanted to, the commoner mentality embedded in her bones still felt that wastefulness was a sin...

Because they knew they wouldn't be able to eat this way again from now on, the children dug in with gusto, fully prepared to consume the future's worth of food now. After all, all the credits had already been transferred over to Ling Lan. And so, they ate and drank, and ate and drank, and then they noticed that the other three people from their exam group had also come to the canteen for their meal. Qi Long thought that since his credits would be confiscated from today onwards, he might as well use more now, and so generously invited them to join in as well. Thus, the six-person group expanded into a nine-person group, packed tightly around the round table.

The lively air at their table drew the attention of everyone around. After all, they were all new here — the old students would only be here a week later — so it was rare to see a group as large as Ling Lan's hanging out together, which naturally drew the envy-jealousy-hate of various parties around them.

One such example was this frowning fellow. He was watching them with a face full of displeasure because his should-be underling Li Jinghong had actually decided to leave his side to join them. This displeased him greatly.

"Li Jinghong, why don't you introduce us?" Although he was furious, he could still maintain his calm. Before he found out more about the opponent, he would not be so rash as to start fighting — he kept the Li family teachings close to heart.

"Ling Lan, Qi Long, Luo Lang... long time no see," greeted Li Jinghong energetically. With that, the companions of exam room 072 were all gathered, and Li Jinghong's arrival was met with a hearty welcome.

Han Jijyun noticed the darkening of the handsome face behind Li Jinghong, and couldn't help but snicker internally. From Li Jinghong's impatient demeanour, as well as the other fellow's arrogant expression, he could just tell that the fellow wasn't all

too likeable.

"Ahem." An impatient reminder of his presence.

With an affected expression of realisation, Li Jinghong pointed at the boy behind him with exaggerated motions and said, "This is the third grandson of our Li family head, Li Yingjie."

Li Yingjie stood proudly, waiting for Li Jinghong to continue elaborating, but Li Jinghong wasn't as cooperative as he had assumed, stopping with just that brief introduction. This made Li Yingjie's expression turn even darker, and he looked on the verge of blowing his top.

By now, even Qi Long had figured out Li Jinghong's stance. It was clear that he really did not like this Li Yingjie, but only tolerated him as another member of the same Li family. However, Li Jinghong could not outright offend him, because Li Yingjie was a descendant of the main family after all, while he was just from the branch family. At the end of the day, he was still one of the members being shaded by the large tree of the Li family.

That said, Qi Long and the others did not share Li Jinghong's concerns — since their comrade didn't like that person showing off in front of him, then they should definitely bite the bullet for him and chase the annoying fellow away.

"Li Yingjie was it? Hello! But we're eating right now, so we don't have time to entertain you. Please show yourself off." Qi Long's blunt dismissal caused Li Yingjie's expression to change dramatically. He had never encountered such treatment before — in the Li family, no one would dare to treat him this way. Mind you, he was a favoured child, for his assessment results at birth had placed him securely before his two elder cousin brothers. Although he was not the first in line to inherit the Li family leadership, he believed that once he grew up, he would definitely be able to usurp his elder cousin's position and obtain the right to inherit.

"You're way too arrogant," bit out Li Yingjie vehemently. If it weren't for the Li family teachings, he would have already charged over to give the other a good pummeling.

Chapter 61

An Intense World of Competition!

Qi Long was not one to back down from a fight. Hearing what Li Yingjie said, he rolled his eyes and replied, "Too much? So what if I'm too much? You've something to say about it?" Sometimes Qi Long was outright shameless because he didn't need to think about the consequences. He believed that his good friend Han Jijyun would definitely come to his rescue, and now he also had Boss at his back, causing him to become even more impudent.

Of course, at his back, his 'solid shields' Ling Lan and Han Jijyun weren't as lighthearted. They shared a commiserating look, wry smiles on their faces. Han Jijyun, in particular, was rather troubled. He found that Qi Long was becoming more and more reckless, which wasn't a good thing. He decided that he would need to sit Qi Long down and give him a good brainwashing soon when no one else was around.

Qi Long's words finally set off Lackey #1 who was standing behind Li Yingjie. He jumped out raging, "Punk, do you know who he is?"

"The third grandson of the Li family head." Qi Long picked at his ear, indicating that he wasn't deaf and that he had heard everything clearly the first time.

"He's also the number one ranking student in this year's special class — the most promising scout student in the Federation this year." The pride on Lackey #1's face made it seem as if the number one rank belonged to himself.

Li Yingjie's face was also full of smugness. He was very proud of the fact that he had managed to stand out among the masses with his skills, obtaining the coveted position of first place.

First place? Qi Long cast a searching look at Li Yingjie. The smug fellow didn't feel that strong — the presence seeping from his body wasn't even a match for his own, not to mention against his Boss's. Qi Long had already had a taste of his Boss Lan's indistinct yet menacing trace of malevolent aura, and knew that it was not to be taken lightly.

Qi Long's natural gift was his strong intuition — in Han Jijyun's words, animal instinct.

He didn't have to think much, being able to accurately gauge an opponent's strength just via pure intuition.

Sensing that the first place of this year's Special Class-A was not even a match for himself, Qi Long's mood took a dark turn, and his attitude became even meaner. With clear disdain, he said, "So what?"

This answer was obviously not according to script, sending the opponent into an immediate apoplectic rage. The others also burst out laughing — Qi Long was absolutely the type that could cause someone to keel over dead out of sheer anger, and the most frightening thing was that he himself wouldn't even be aware why the other died.

"You —— wait till our Boss comes after you!" Lackey #2 was also moved to help.

"Is that so? Then I'll be waiting," said Qi Long shortly, still looking at Li Yingjie with contempt.

Qi Long's impudence was because he had the utmost confidence in himself, and he also believed that no one could best him aside from his own boss. Furthermore, even if he did sh*t the bed, there was still Boss to pick up after him. He had faith that Boss Lan would not just stand by while his own followers were being bullied... in any case, Qi Long was already shamelessly counting on Ling Lan.

Qi Long's words caused Li Yingjie's cheeks to puff up like a toad's in anger. However, he still had the mind to maintain the poise of a member of an elite family, and chose not to start a fight right then and there. In the end, he only glared darkly at Qi Long, and left with these words, "Just you wait."

The waters of the scout academy were truly deep! Li Yingjie still remembered the cautionary words of his father — before he fully figured out how things stood in the scout academy, he should not move recklessly. His father had also mentioned that the main principle in the school was 'survival of the fittest' — it was almost impossible to dominate within the school by relying on one's family background or wealth unless you managed to buy the loyalty of some of the more formidable students to be part of your guard. Otherwise, he could only suck it up even if he were bullied by the commoner children within the school. His family would not intervene, so he could only rely on himself to resolve any problems.

He had reservations because of his father's words, so he decided that he would hold off for now. After he had gained a better understanding of the school and had built up his own power base, then there would be plenty of opportunities for him to discipline that impudent fellow and teach him what's what. Li Yingjie was very confident. With his own abilities and his family background, there was no reason he would lose to anyone in the academy.

Since the master had left, the lackeys were sure to follow, but the fierce glares they left behind was a clear sign that the matter wasn't over. Nevertheless, this was now a matter for the future. Li Jinghong released a heavy breath. Finally, he was rid of that annoyance.

"Why do you hate him so much? I heard he was a strong contender to be the next family head." Han Jijyun was curious; the struggles within the Li family had always been intense. Every generation, the crowning of the family head was always the result of a descendant of the main family stepping up to bend all the other contenders to his will by force — the so-called hierarchy of inheritance was just an empty promise. According to the survival principles of the elite families, Li Jinghong, a branch family member, should be doing his best to kiss up to Li Yingjie.

Li Jinghong's expression dimmed, and he said, "I really don't like him. No matter how talented he is, I still won't like him. You all don't know... but our eldest cousin brother is really really nice. All of us children in the branch families really like him, but unfortunately..." Abruptly, Li Jinghong's expression hardened with determination. "Regardless of the result, I will never stand on the opposite side of my eldest cousin brother."

"This way, won't you offend Li Yingjie?" Han Jijyun shook his head. Li Jinghong's way of thinking was really unsuitable for survival in a large elite family like the Li family. The consequence of being led by one's emotions was often becoming mere cannon fodder in the crossfire. If Li Yingjie really ended up becoming the family head, Li Jinghong's actions now would guarantee that he would have no place within the Li family in the future.

"It's fine. Who knows if a child more talented than him would appear in the future?" Li Jinghong did not believe that it would be so easy for Li Yingjie to just claim the position of family head. In this generation, due to his eldest cousin brother's mediocrity, all the children of the main family were champing at the bit — hidden manoeuvres abounded as they all fought with their sights set on the position of family

head.

"Not to mention, even if Li Yingjie really got lucky and managed to inherit, I am not afraid. I'm prepared to become a professional soldier, so the Li family can't touch me in the future." Li Jinghong laid out his plans, stating why he wasn't afraid of offending Li Yingjie now.

He didn't want to see his favourite elder cousin brother forced to lose the position of family head and being put into captivity for the rest of his life. So, he decided to leave the messy quagmire of the Li family as early as possible. What he couldn't see couldn't hurt him.

This was the reality of a large elite family — the complex environment full of cruelty and bloodshed forced the children within it to grow up so quickly.

"Welcome then." Han Jijyun really liked Li Jinghong's personality. Planning out his future so early, and pursuing it with determination, ignoring all the miscellaneous distractions along the way — this type of person would succeed easily. Han Jijyun liked making friends with people like this because they wouldn't give him any trouble.

Yup, one troublemaking Qi Long was more than enough, thank you. Han Jijyun refused to accept a second one.

The ten people of group 072 did not get hung up on the matter for long and continued to feast and be merry. At this moment, Ling Lan was still unaware that her future would be full of entanglements with the Li family...

In the afternoon, they toured the entire campus grounds of the scout academy. Halfway through, when they passed by a combat hall, Qi Long had dragged Ling Lan in for a fight. Naturally, Ling Lan pummelled Qi Long soundly. However, despite his swollen eyes and bruised nose, Qi Long continued to keep a silly grin on his face. Seeing his full mouth of white teeth on display, one could just tell he was really very simple and was a masochist to boot.

After eating lunch, Ling Lan had already arranged the time for her pick up with her family. When it was about time, she bid farewell to these companions of group 072. Perhaps it was just the way of this world that the children were so mature and intelligent, in such a way that Ling Lan did not feel at all annoyed or bored when

interacting with them. Of course, she was also exceptionally patient, because these adorable children with varying personalities had triggered her maternal instincts to the max...

With reluctance, the children accompanied Ling Lan to the school gates. Especially Qi Long, who strongly requested Ling Lan to convince her parents to let her stay with them at school. According to him, being able to fight with Boss Lan every day — it was awesome just thinking about it!

Learning of Qi Long's plans, Ling Lan, who had originally started considering staying at the school after all, decisively dismissed the idea completely. Dammit. She definitely had no interest to cross moves with Qi Long every day. This fellow fought like a maniac, and was as stubborn as a cockroach — although she was confident in defeating him, she couldn't be certain how long it would take, so it was overall a troublesome labour which exhausted both her mind and body.

The school gates were shut tight. All was silent, and there was no one around. When the guard at the gates saw Ling Lan's group coming out, he immediately rushed forward to stop them. Ling Lan's group was still dressed in their own clothes, so the guard couldn't tell which class they were from. As today was registration day, the school did not restrict the children's dressing. But from tomorrow onwards, the students of the Central Scout Academy would have to put on their individual uniforms, otherwise they would find it very difficult to get around the scout academy.

With regards to the scout academy uniforms, there were a total of four colours. These colours were not for distinguishing between the lower grades and the upper grades, but were meant to distinguish between the classes. This taught the children to recognise what rank and privilege were from the very beginning, and about what 'survival of the fittest' meant.

The school uniforms resembled the Federation military uniforms and looked very smart when worn. The colour of the Special Class-A uniforms was a vibrant red, and the edges of its sleeves and collar were also different from the other classes. They were decorated with gold patterns, an understated nod to luxury. The uniform represented the school's hopes for these children — may they blaze as brightly as the red of their coats, and finally become one of the dazzling battle stars of the Federation.

According to school rules, when facing a child wearing the red uniform of Special Class-A, children wearing uniforms of any other colour, regardless of their grade level,

would have to give way. Of course, if someone from Special Class-A insulted a child wearing a uniform in any other colour, the child had the right to challenge the other to combat during the large-scale ranking every six months. All consequences to be borne by the involved parties, of course.

Meanwhile, Special Class-B had white uniforms. Special Class-B consisted of children who were just a shade weaker than the Special Class-A kids. In the future, it was possible that they could achieve the heights of the Special Class-A kids, but they could also end up becoming a mediocre member of the military. Therefore, the white of their uniform was a message, telling them that their future was up to them to colour in — what colour it became in the end was all up to their own individual efforts.

Then, the uniforms of the merit classes were blue, while the regular classes' were green. Both these colours symbolized sources of life — the school wanted to tell the children through these colours that they were an indispensable part of the Federation.

Of course, the colour of one's school uniform was not set in stone. As long as you worked hard, there was a chance to move up every six months. The school would be impartial in rearranging the classes based on the newest rankings.

The 50 slots of Special Class-A were the prize being fought over by over tens of thousands of students, while the original special class kids would have to give it their all to keep their spots.

From the very first day of school, the Central Scout Academy had already started teaching the children that this was an unbelievably intense world of competition.

Chapter 62

An Intentional Arrangement

When the guard found out that Ling Lan was a member of Special Class-A, who had also chosen to be a day student, he was dumbfounded. After so many years of being a guard at the school, this was still the first time he had met a day student.

From this, we can see that the freedom to be a day student offered by the school was basically just an empty privilege. It's obvious if you think about it — with such a competitive system in place, every student would wish that they could spend the 24 hours each day as if they were 48 hours... who'd be willing to waste time commuting back and forth from school?

Although the guard was shocked, he still let Ling Lan out of the gates without comment. Of course, Qi Long and the other kids were mercilessly locked within the gates. Who asked them to choose to board at school? Upon becoming a boarder, students were not allowed to take even half a step out of school grounds outside of specified times, even if one was a special class student.

Ling Lan waved goodbye to her companions and stepped out of the school gates. Right outside, the Ling family hover car was already parked, waiting.

This time, the Ling family had sent out five hover cars, and Ling Lan's main escort was the only non-betrayer of the rescue team, Ling Yu. Chamberlain Ling Qin hadn't come because he was busy wrapping things up with the betrayers.

Ling Lan got into the hover car arranged by Ling Yu, and Ling Yu got in after her, and then started reporting on the investigation results they had gathered in the course of the afternoon.

It turned out that Ling Hua had betrayed the Ling family because he didn't want his child to follow in his footsteps to become a Ling family loyalist for the next generation.

Ling Hua's son, Ling Yi, was younger than Ling Lan by one year. At his birth, he was assessed to be just a hair weaker than Ling Lan in terms of fitness and potential. In other words, Ling Yi had a very high probability of becoming an ace operator. However,

the offspring of Ling family loyalists had no right to enrol and study in a scout academy — they could only accept the in-house education organised by the Ling family. This meant that Ling Yi's growth would be stunted — he would never be able to pilot a mecha better than the standard mecha, and his chances of being promoted to an ace operator were pretty much nil.

As Ling Yi grew closer and closer to turning six, Ling Hua had been tormented by his internal struggle. It was then that a chance for his son to excel beyond his station had appeared before him, and so Ling Hua's loyalty had wavered.

The other party had promised that as long as Ling Lan died, the Ling family would be dissolved. Then, Ling Hua's family could become regular citizens again, and Ling Yi would be able to formally enrol and study at a scout academy, obtaining a bright and limitless future.

After listening to Ling Yu's report, Ling Lan sighed regretfully. "How stupid."

Ling Yu said dazedly, "Yes, the captain was really so stupid... if only he had told us about this, he could have used the information to gain enough merit to request for his freedom."

Ling Yu still remembered that there was one rule among the Ling family rules: Any loyalist who performed exceptionally meritorious services could request one thing of the family head that was within the head's means. As long as Ling Hua had related the plan against Ling Lan to Chamberlain Ling Qin, it would have counted as an exceptionally meritorious service, and he would have been able to put forward his request. Ling Lan and Chamberlain Ling Qin would never have refused him.

Till this point, Ling Lan and Ling Yu just couldn't understand why Ling Hua had been willing to walk down this dark path, finally choosing to betray the Ling family rather than use this information as a bargaining chip.

However, once Ling Lan returned to the living room of the Ling family main estate, the waiting Ling Qin told her the rest of the information he had just discovered, which included the other reason behind Ling Hua's betrayal.

With a serious expression, Ling Qin said, "According to those three loyalists, during a fit of boasting, Ling Hua revealed that the other party had promised to provide his son with six tubes of gene stimulating agent every year until Ling Yi could absorb no more.

Of course, he had also promised the other three loyalists that their descendants would also be able to enjoy this privilege if their stats were good enough."

"The other party is certainly generous. Looks like this person who's after me is someone powerful." Ling Lan finally understood why Ling Hua had chosen to betray them in the end. Even though the offer seemed to be just six tubes of gene agent, it had given Ling Hua a sense of how powerful the other side really was, implying that crushing the Ling family was not too difficult for them.

"Ling Hua was frightened. He felt that the Ling family would not be able to go up against that person; he didn't want his child to be buried along with the Ling family." Ling Qin naturally understood Ling Hua's mentality as well, and sighed sadly once again.

"Young Master Lan, what do you plan to do with Ling Hua's wife and child?" asked Ling Qin carefully. There wasn't a single family which would accept the orphan of a traitor; many families would choose to eliminate the problem entirely by getting rid of them as soon as possible.

Just as Ling Lan was about to answer, a commotion broke out at the main gates. A child could be heard crying, "Young Master Lan, Young Master Lan, I beg you, please see me!"

From the sofa, Ling Lan quirked a brow, lifting her head to look at Ling Qin. As such, she saw when a hint of awkwardness flashed past Ling Qin's face. It looked like he knew who the child screaming outside was.

Ling Lan did not ask any questions. She just stood and walked to the gate, with Ling Qin and Ling Yu following close behind her.

The moment Ling Lan arrived at the gate, she saw a little midget just a little smaller than her struggling within the grasp of one of the guards. He was still screaming for Young Master Lan, and when he saw her appear, his eyes lit up with a savage joy.

"Who are you? Why do you want to see me?" Ling Lan asked impassively.

"So you're Young Master Lan?" At Ling Lan's words, the little midget struggled even harder.

Ling Yu, who was standing behind Ling Lan, threw a pointed look at the guard holding

onto the child, and the guard immediately loosened his grip and retreated to the side.

"I'm called Ling Yi. My dad's Ling Hua." The midget straightened up and introduced himself after calming himself for a moment.

Ling Lan nodded internally. No wonder Ling Hua was willing to become a traitor for his son — the child was indeed very bright, and could already control his emotions well enough to grasp opportunities in his path.

"They told me that, my dad is dead... my dad was so strong, how could he die?" There was still hope on Ling Yi's face, as if hoping that Ling Lan would tell him that all this wasn't true.

Ling Lan secretly sighed; Ling Hua may have wronged her, but he hadn't wronged his son Ling Yi. A thought tumbled through her mind, and she replied, "Even the strongest person cannot always fend off an enemy's underhanded schemes. Ling Yi, your father is really dead."

"Who killed my father?" Ling Yi's eyes were clouded with despair.

"I do not know, but we're guessing that the orders came from someone in the upper ranks of the military, and that my father was also killed by one of the opponent's plots," said Ling Lan sadly and regretfully.

Ling Lan resolutely pushed the blame of Ling Hua's death onto the enemy who wanted her dead. She looked forward to Ling Yi's vengeance against the other once he grew up. After all, even though Ling Hua had died at her hands, wasn't the root cause the other party's inducement?

Of course, Ling Lan's words caused a flash of surprise to pass through both Ling Qin's and Ling Yu's eyes, but their expressions quickly relaxed, as if pleased with the way Ling Lan had spun things.

Gaining the answer he sought, the flames of hatred blazed in Ling Yi's eyes. "Young Master Lan, I'll definitely become stronger. At that time, I hope Young Master Lan will give me the chance to end the enemy with my own hand."

Ling Yi's words caused an irrepressible shudder to run through Ling Qin's and Ling Yu's body. A chill settled in their hearts — could this end up being a case of warming a snake in one's bosom ¹?

Only Ling Lan seemed unperturbed, as she nodded and said, "Alright, I promise you this. Also, I must tell you — when your father sacrificed himself, he requested that you be set free, and I've agreed to it..."

But Ling Yi interrupted Ling Lan to say, "I don't want to leave the Ling family."

"Why?" Ling Lan was curious.

"I want to inherit my father's position. I want to become Young Master Lan's most trusted loyalist." Ling Yi's face was filled with determination. Ever since he was little, he had received education telling him to be loyal to the Ling family and the family head — the thought of leaving the Ling family had never crossed his young mind.

This response caused Ling Lan to fall silent.

Ling Hua, you betrayed yourself, and betrayed the Ling family... but your child had no intentions to leave the Ling family to begin with. Wasn't that just ironic?

"I really want to agree with your request, but unfortunately, I promised your father first. A person should not go back on their word..." said Ling Lan regretfully.

Ling Lan's words made Ling Yi burst out into tears instantly. After all, he was only just a five year old child — facing an unknown future, even the strongest and brightest child would not be able to bear the anxiety within his heart. Like the child he was, he wailed.

"Ling Yi, if you want to inherit your father's position, then you can't cry anymore," with reddened eyes, Ling Lan comforted the boy. "Your father wished for you to enter a scout academy, and then obtain a place in a military school, and finally become a professional military man. You cannot let your father down."

Then, Ling Lan patted him on the head and continued, "However, I didn't say anything about sending you away. You will still be a member of the Ling family, only a free man in name. When you've grown up, it'll be up to you whether you want to leave or return to the Ling family."

Ling Lan's words reignited the hope in Ling Yi's heart. He wiped away his tears, and said, "Yes! I'll work hard, Young Master Lan. I'll definitely come back." He said this with steel-like conviction.

He then turned around with a serious look on his face to speak to Ling Yu, who was behind Ling Lan. "Brother-in-law Yu, I'll leave Young Master Lan to you for now. Once I've become stronger, I'll definitely come back to take your position from you." That said, he bowed to Ling Lan in farewell and left the Ling family main estate.

With a face full of worry, Ling Yu asked, "Young Master Lan, isn't this arrangement too risky?" If Ling Yi ever found out the truth, it was very likely that he would turn against them instead.

Ling Lan smiled a slight smile. "Isn't it more interesting this way? Whether or not Ling Yi becomes useful to me in the end, he is still a good chess piece."

Ling Lan's words rendered Ling Yu speechless — he really couldn't figure out what Ling Lan's true thoughts were now.

Ling Qin's expression was a little unsettled, but in the end, he said nothing.

Ling Lan turned her head to face Ling Qin with a harsh expression. "Grandpa Chamberlain, you've already handled the traitors and those prisoners, right?"

Ling Qin's heart skipped a beat, and he stared at Ling Lan intently.

Ling Lan asked, "About Ling Hua's betrayal... besides the three of us, who else knows?"

Ling Yu hurriedly shook his head. Out of caution in case there were other traitors within the Ling family, the three traitorous mecha squad members had been interrogated personally by him and Ling Qin. No one else knew any details.

Ling Qin's verbal response corroborated this. After Ling Yu had left, he had continued the interrogation on his own, which was how he had found out the key reason behind Ling Hua's betrayal.

"That's good. After getting rid of those people, as long as the three of us keep our mouths shut, Ling Yi should never be able to find out the truth." Ling Lan's words sent cold sweat running down Ling Qin's and Ling Yu's back. Was this Ling Lan's subtle way of warning them?

"What if the person who tried to buy Ling Hua comes out to tell Ling Yi the truth?" Ling Qin was still uneasy about this; Ling Yi was clearly a ticking time bomb.

"Perhaps then we can inculcate the idea in Ling Yi that all of it is a plot by the opponent... Anyway, it's a bigger problem if he doesn't reveal himself. If he comes out, we could then follow the vine to get the melon ², and find out once and for all who is trying to harm our Ling family." Ling Lan's expression was sly.

Ling Qin's eyes lit up. "This is a good plan." If Ling Yi really managed to draw out that venomous snake from the shadows, it was worth it to take the risk.

Just like that, the three of them discussed things a little more, and then Ling Qin and Ling Yu went off to handle their respective matters. Meanwhile, Ling Lan was left sitting alone on the sofa of the large living room. Once she confirmed that the two men had left, she sighed softly, "To save Ling Yi, was it really necessary to make things so complicated?"

On the surface, Ling Qin and Ling Yu had seemed as if they really wanted to tear the weed out by its root ³, but in truth, everything they did was to salvage Ling Yi's life. Otherwise, how could the little Ling Yi suddenly appear at the main door of the Ling family main house?

The loyalists protecting the main house must have received the order to let Ling Yi through to the main doors, and both Ling Qin and Ling Yu should have something to do with this order... The moment Ling Lan saw Ling Yi, she had understood this immediately.

Although Ling Lan had no intention of taking Ling Yi's life to begin with, this sort of intentional arrangement annoyed her.

It was great that the Ling family rules were humane and reasonable, however, they weren't ideal for warding against insubordination. In times when the family head was weak while the servants were stronger, this type of subtle nudging without the master's express permission was likely to happen. Although they didn't mean any harm, and there was no negative impact on her currently, if she let this go on unchecked, it might end up causing her a lot of trouble someday.

Perhaps she should think of a way to change the current status quo, otherwise, it may really become impossible for her to continue putting her trust in the Ling family people. And that, would truly be a tragic thing. Both for Ling Lan, and for Ling Qin and the rest.

Chapter 63

Number Five Appears!

Walking out from the Ling family main house, Ling Yu finally couldn't contain himself any longer, and asked Ling Qin in front of him, "Elder Qin, why didn't you ask about the cockpits ejecting from the mecha?"

Ling Yu knew that that must have been caused by Ling Lan somehow, otherwise he wouldn't have been so calm when the mecha had fired. It's just — he really couldn't figure out how Ling Lan had done it. Could it really be that he could control A.I.?

Of course, Ling Yu knew that this was preposterous — a joke. Everyone knew that A.I.s were self-contained systems. If a hacker was crazy enough to try and control an A.I., the A.I. would shut down automatically, and the mecha would automatically switch over to manual controls.

Even the most skilful hacker in the world would not be able to succeed. Moreover, once the A.I. had shut down, the controls would still be in the hands of the operators in the cockpits. It couldn't be that all three operators had made the same control error, right?

Of course, another possibility was the A.I. itself glitching... Ling Yu naturally shied away from this avenue of thought. If that were true, it would certainly be a catastrophe of epic proportions — it would utterly destroy the entire weapons system of the Federation. The Federation just could not afford for this to be true.

In front of him, Ling Qin paused for a moment before turning his head back to caution, "Ling Yu, you overstep."

Ling Yu's heart skipped a beat. Every generation of the Ling family head had his own trump card and last resort, and these were considered forbidden territory within the Ling family. No one was allowed to look into it, and violators of this unspoken rule would receive a bloody end. And here he had stumbled across the line unknowingly.

"Yes, thank you, Elder Qin, for the reminder." At this point, Ling Yu no longer held a whit of curiosity about it; perhaps this was just one of the Ling family's last resorts. It made sense when one thought about it. Mecha were the ultimate solo weapon — even

the common standard mecha could easily wipe out a bare-handed martial expert. If he didn't keep something up his sleeve, how could the Ling family head put mecha into others' hands without worry?

It had to be said that Ling Yu had an overactive imagination, his brain easily coming up with all sorts of wild ideas to fill in the blanks. The result of his 'reasoning' was a back drenched with cold sweat, and the already loyal Ling Yu had no more stray thoughts, becoming Ling Lan's most loyal loyalist in his lifetime.

Ling Qin observed Ling Yu's realisation and acceptance, and smiled a satisfied smile. Ling Qin was a good elder, and a good guard, but he was not a good steward. If he hadn't been so lax in his management all these years, the people of the Ling family wouldn't have been so uncertain about their own position within the household, resulting in that tragic betrayal. However, Ling Qin was a person who knew how to reflect. Since he had made a mistake previously, then he would change now.

So he had deviated from his usual agreeableness into this stern demeanour, and had issued an immediate warning in the face of Ling Yu's curiosity. If this was before, Ling Qin would have patiently explained things to Ling Yu before counselling Ling Yu to drop the matter. He wouldn't have outright warned Ling Yu without providing an explanation.

It looked like Ling Lan wasn't the only one who had sensed the problem within the Ling family. Ling Qin had sensed it too and had begun his attempts to correct it. As for whether it would be effective, only time would tell.

Of course, Ling Qin may have been affecting an enigmatic look as he warned Ling Yu, but in reality, he himself had no clue how the cockpits had been automatically ejected from the three mecha. Back then, his first thought was indeed that this was a last resort of the Ling family.

He still recalled that when Ling Xiao had left, he had said something carefully and intently by Lan Luofeng's ear. Perhaps even then, Master Ling Xiao had sensed the problem within the Ling family, and for precaution's sake, had passed the secret of this last resort on to Lan Luofeng. (Grandpa Chamberlain, you're really thinking too much. The man just wanted to say some sweet nothings to his beau and was embarrassed to be overheard.) And later, Lan Luofeng must have passed it on in turn to Ling Lan.

It should be noted that Chamberlain Ling Qin's ability to fill-in-the-blanks was

certainly a match for Ling Yu's — initially, Ling Lan had still been worried about how she would explain this issue away, but now, because of these two's misunderstandings, it was no longer a problem.

Mind you, as Ling Lan had been discussing the matter of Ling Yi earlier, she had been constantly worried that they would ask about that. Of course, she had already come up with a strategy to handle it, but unexpectedly, the dreaded question hadn't come even when they had left. This made Ling Lan very thankful, and she could finally relax. Since everyone was willing to pretend, she was also happy to play along.

Still, Ling Lan wasn't happy for long before she was mercilessly dragged into the learning space.

That night, under Lan Luofeng's praise, Ling Lan had played up her cuteness to the max and feasted until she was full. Just as she was humming and preparing to lie down to rest, she felt her consciousness being sucked out of her body by a terrifying force.

F*ck! Not again!

Ling Lan savagely raised her middle finger against the dark world before her, mentally cursing at the tyranny of the learning space, and at how it didn't know how to respect its own host. Of course, Ling Lan only dared to be so impudent now — once Instructor Number One showed up, Ling Lan would be as obedient as she could be. It couldn't be helped. Number One was just too scary — Ling Lan's strength was improving little by little, and the more it improved, the more she could sense how overwhelming Instructor Number One's strength was. With just one look, he could render her immobile...

As expected, the sombre coffin-faced Instructor Number One appeared, and Ling Lan immediately hid away her indignant expression, lowering her head and smoothing her brows into a face eager to learn.

"Today's ambush. What are your thoughts?" asked Number One directly.

"In front of mecha, the ultimate solo weapon, pure physical strength is nothing, like an ant." Ling Lan would never forget the helplessness she had felt when facing the mecha. If it hadn't been for Little Four's help, she would have been done for.

"For the present you, it's already not bad that you could comprehend that." Number One didn't seem particularly satisfied with Ling Lan's response, but he wasn't angered

by it either. He continued, "Based on your current performance and condition, I have to adjust your training plan."

Ling Lan was taken aback; she had no idea what Instructor Number One meant.

"Number Five!" Number One spoke once again, but called out an unfamiliar number.

"Big Bro, I'm here." A vaguely lazy voice rang out from behind Ling Lan.

Ling Lan abruptly turned her head, and saw a rather dashing looking young man with a smile on his lips. When his eyes met hers, he waved at her enthusiastically. Facing Number One's stifling presence, he seemed entirely unconcerned.

Ling Lan's gaze narrowed; this man was definitely more than he seemed. She knew very well how formidable as usual Instructor Number One's presence was — the fact that this man could be so carefree in the face of that... did it mean that his presence was just as formidable?

"After this, your training will be led by Number Five, with Number Nine assisting." Number One didn't seem to mind Number Five's flippant attitude, disappearing after laying down the law.

Meanwhile, Number Nine had also appeared in the learning space. When she saw Number Five, the subtle smile on her face faded into ice. "Number Five, long time no see."

"Lil Sis Number Nine! It's been such a long time. Your brother here has almost contracted lovesickness since it's been so long. My hair turning white overnight and all..." Number Five scurried over to Number Nine, face filled with emotion as he clasped Number Nine's hand. His expression was full of longing, completely oblivious of the throbbing green vein on Number Nine's forehead.

Faced with Number Five's shameless words and actions, Number Nine threw a kick at him without any hesitation.

With just a single leap, Number Five escaped the range of Number Nine's attack, but he still showed no restraint, continuing to tease, "Lil Sis Number Nine, so passionate even after so long. You make elder brother so happy."

"Number Five, do not forget your mission. Number One isn't as patient as I am," huffed

Number Nine coldly. She seemed used to Number Five's lackadaisical attitude, bluntly reminding him not to go overboard.

When Number Five heard this, his grin visibly froze for a beat.

Number Nine didn't pay any more attention to Number Five, turning instead to Ling Lan to say, "Ling Lan, Number Five's training will not be easy, you must be prepared." Facing her pet disciple, she couldn't help but worry a bit more than usual. She understood that Number One wouldn't allow her to be the only one responsible for Ling Lan's training this time because he was afraid that her affection for Ling Lan would affect her progress.

Although Number One seemed to be very dissatisfied with Ling Lan, nitpicking at any little flaw, Number One actually thought very highly of Ling Lan, even training her up as if she were his successor. Otherwise, Number One wouldn't have modified his training plan for Ling Lan again and again.

Hearing this, Number Five's smile deepened once again. "Number Nine, relax, Ling Lan's also my student. I'll take good care of him." For some reason, looking at Number Five's smile, Ling Lan felt a chill settle over her heart.

Ling Lan's intuition was not mistaken. When Number Nine heard Number Five's words, she did not relax at all, but rather looked at Ling Lan with strange pity in her eyes. This gaze set off the final alarms in Ling Lan's mind — hells, this was definitely nothing good.

Before Ling Lan could ask Number Nine any questions, Number Five flicked a finger, and Ling Lan was thrown into a new learning area, an endless grassy plain. With a tortured look on her face, Ling Lan heard the voice of the system ring out by her ear:

Mission: 1 minute later, a wolf pack will come. Please hold out against the wolf pack's attack for 20 minutes without dying. Reward for completion unknown! Punishment for failure unknown!

Ling Lan had no thought to spare right now for reward or punishment. Her forehead was beaded with sweat — goddammit, actually expecting her to fight bare-handed against wolves! And she had to hold out for 20 minutes as well — this was definitely a mission meant to kill someone. Ling Lan did not believe that the wolves in this wolf pack here would be like the wolves from her previous planet. The wild beasts within

the learning space were definitely several times bigger and stronger than their earthly counterparts.

It wasn't that Ling Lan had not considered running away, but unfortunately she had no idea which direction the wolf pack would come from, or even if they would attack from all directions. Since she couldn't be sure, recklessly running away might just put her in a worse situation. She might as well just save her strength and wait for the final battle.

Ling Lan naturally used the last of her waiting time to observe her grassy surroundings. If she could just find an easily defensible location, then setting aside 20 minutes, she should even be able to defend for a fair bit longer.

Unfortunately, Ling Lan was disappointed. The learning space was not like the games of her previous world, full of bugs — in this grassland before her, there wasn't a single obstruction in sight, the endless flat plain of grass only followed by yet endless flat plain of grass. And on the ground itself, there was only soft grass on top of loose soil. There weren't even any hard rocks, so Ling Lan couldn't even find one to use as a weapon even if she wanted to.

Dammit, the learning space was truly vicious. It wouldn't allow Ling Lan to borrow any external strength whatsoever, determined to make Ling Lan fight off the wolves with just her bare hands.

A minute's time went by swiftly, and then countless howls broke the silence from all around Ling Lan. Sure enough, the wolves were not going to come from just one direction, but were surrounding her. For Ling Lan, this just made the situation even more perilous.

Ling Lan narrowed her eyes and released the malevolent aura contained within her body in a sudden blast. The moment this malevolent aura appeared, a change fell over the wolves' howls...

Chapter 64

The Rabbit Sky Leap Skill!

Against a wolf pack, showing any weakness was not going to work. A wolf pack wouldn't think as deeply as a human would — in their eyes, the weaker the prey, the easier it would be for them to release their aggression upon it. In contrast, against a stronger opponent, a wolf pack would be much more cautious, and wouldn't just pounce recklessly.

Sure enough, the full blast of Ling Lan's malevolent aura made the alpha wolf pause — after all, Ling Lan was someone who had killed the King of the Swamp before and had been baptised in the blood of the various kingly beasts. This malevolent aura caused the wolves to become wary, and the wolves who had been bounding at her from all directions stopped at the lead wolf's howling cries. Still, they remained poised to attack, just waiting for the alpha wolf's signal.

The dense pack of wolves almost filled the entire grassy plain, and every wolf was extremely large and fierce, their bodies as big as a small cow's. Their snouts were spread in savage grins, and drool hung from the razor-sharp tips of their exposed teeth.

Facing such delicious prey, the eyes of this pack of ravenous wolves were almost glowing green... If a normal person was here and was faced with this scene, he would likely piss his pants and collapse to the ground.

Still, Ling Lan was unaffected. She remained cool-headed and continued to look for her chance.

At this moment, she was very grateful that she had gone through the survival training in the primordial forest. After experiencing the terror of surviving there, she could keep her calm in this situation, heart steady and muscles pliant.

Both sides observed each other for a long moment. And then, the alpha wolf's howl rang out once again. Ling Lan's ears twitched, sifting through the cries coming from the wolf pack, and she managed to confirm that there were actually five alpha wolves of equal rank within the pack. Pleasant surprise flashed through Ling Lan's eyes —

perhaps this was the fighting chance she had to hold out for 20 minutes.

Without waiting for the five alpha wolves to come to an agreement, Ling Lan charged forward, her target being the area to the northeast side. Different from the other wolves in the wolf pack, the wolves in this area had a clear red line on their foreheads.

Ling Lan's unexpected action caused chaos to break out within the pack surrounding her, but a piercing howl rang out, followed closely by the cries of the four other alpha wolves', bringing the pack back to order and silence.

Only the wolves with red-lined foreheads continued to bare their fangs at Ling Lan who had invaded their territory. It looked like the alpha wolf of this part of the pack felt that this was a direct challenge to its authority, and that Ling Lan was a prey that had delivered itself to death's door.

Although Ling Lan's fists flew furiously, savagely sending red-lined wolf after red-lined wolf flying, she was still keeping a close watch on the whole situation. Seeing the other wolf packs under the other alpha wolves sitting by the side-lines as she had expected, her heart settled.

Of course, Ling Lan didn't think the danger was over yet. If the red-lined wolf pack couldn't handle her, the alpha of this pack would probably compromise in the end and choose to cooperate with the other wolf packs. At that time, she would still be subject to a group attack.

Frankly, although the wolves had looked as if they worked together like a single entity at first, they were still divided by their respective packs. Cooperating to take down a prey was fine, but if one pack wanted to enter another pack's territory, that was definitely out of the question. Unless the particular wolf pack was weaker and needed the reinforcement of outside help, only then would the alpha wolf loosen this restriction. Ling Lan had cleverly grasped hold of this point and had jumped on her own into the red-lined wolves' territory, forcing the other wolf packs to step back and wait.

Ling Lan may be small, but the power behind her fists wasn't, and her physical fitness was certainly of the abnormal sort. After six years of continuous training with the Qi cultivation exercises, along with the medicinal baths of the Ling family, her body's resilience had long since exceeded that of an average person's. Although her skin still looked as fair and rosy as a maiden's, it was very difficult for normal blades to leave

any sort of mark on her body.

Somewhere high up in the air out of Ling Lan's sight, Number Five and Number Nine were watching the fight.

Number Five nodded and said, "Not bad, she has good basics. Number Nine, looks like you put in a lot of effort."

Number Nine's eyes held a trace of a smile, and her tone was proud as she said, "Yes, Ling Lan is very hardworking and motivated."

Number Five glanced at Number Nine with a half-smile on his face. "You're satisfied with her current progress? It doesn't seem like she's reached her limits yet — Number Nine, you've become soft on her after all. That's not like you."

Number Nine sniffed. "I think this level of progress is best suited for her." However, after she said this, a subtle blush stole over the skin behind Number Nine's ears.

It couldn't be helped — Number Nine couldn't really say that with full honesty. It was the truth that she hadn't pushed Ling Lan as hard as she could in the past few years.

Mind you, the teaching approach of the learning space was to use the most extreme and cruellest methods imaginable to force the children to break past their limits and unleash their innate talents. It made the children challenge their limits in every way, physically and mentally, and even in other respects.

This sort of cruel teaching approach put every single child who entered the learning space under an endless amount of torment and duress. Almost all the children had not been able to bear it, and would end up either breaking down in tears, running away in fear, or even losing all their confidence to loudly beg for mercy... this was all part of the phase of vulnerability that the children had to experience and overcome.

But Ling Lan stood out as an oddball. It was as if she had already established her goals early on (the girl was a proper adult who had lived two lives, not an ignorant young child, of course she wouldn't be so easily scared off by this type of teaching approach), so, in the six years with Number Nine in charge, no matter how harsh the training, or how unreasonable the courses, Ling Lan had endured. She had never voiced a single complaint, nor shed a single tear. This stoicism ended up moving the typically

unfeeling Number Nine, leading her to become somewhat soft on Ling Lan.

It had to be said that this was a beautiful misunderstanding!

Number Five touched his chin with his right hand, and the smile on his lips deepened. Perhaps this was why Number One had unsealed him — this child had actually managed to affect Number Nine, how interesting...

Seeing Number Five's strange smile, Number Nine couldn't help but worry for Ling Lan. She raised her voice in warning, "Number Five, don't go overboard."

Number Nine knew how insane Number Five could get — at the beginning, countless promising prodigies had had their wings snapped by his hand. Of course, anyone who managed to survive his training would certainly become an unimaginable talent... but she had never seen Number Five succeed in training anyone.

Number Nine looked over at Ling Lan with a complicated gaze. It's not that she didn't want Ling Lan to become great, but rather than subject her to the unspeakable torments of the training period, she'd rather see Ling Lan happy and carefree... but could a powerless person truly be happy and carefree?

As if coming to some realisation, Number Nine abruptly turned away, and with her back to Number Five, she said, "Once you're done with training, come find me."

Number Five quirked a brow. "What? Not going to follow us around anymore? Aren't you afraid I'll end up ruining your beloved disciple?" After all, the reason they had come here was due to Number Nine's worry to begin with.

At this moment, Number Nine's face no longer held any traces of worry. With a cool expression, she said, "Number One did the right thing. I am not suitable to be Ling Lan's main instructor right now. But, I believe that Ling Lan will definitely complete your training course."

"So much confidence in her?" Number Five was taken aback. For context, it should be known that he had ruined several hundred prodigies with his training methods previously, which was why he had been sealed within the learning space. Thus, he himself was very surprised when he was unsealed this time — and even more surprisingly, Number One had actually put him in charge of their current host.

"Ling Lan's not just my pet disciple, she's also Elder Brother Number One's." A

confident smile appeared on Number Nine's lips before she disappeared from the area.

Number Five stared at the spot where Number Nine disappeared and smiled thoughtfully. Number One's disciple? That was just too interesting!

Meanwhile, around Ling Lan, the bodies of red-lined wolves were beginning to pile up, and although yet more red-lined wolves continued to circle her, their attacks were not as aggressive as they had been before, and were perhaps even a little tentative.

This scenario enraged the alpha wolf of the red-lined wolves — it felt that its authority had been undermined by this weak little prey before it. So it let loose another howl, spurring on the attacks of the red-lined wolves, causing them to become more aggressive.

Bam! A red-lined wolf who was lunging for Ling Lan's throat was punched right in the head.

Crack! Its skull fractured, and its calf-sized body fell heavily to the ground. And there the red-lined wolf lay, whining piteously, and after a few final fluttering breaths, its chest went still and the wolf never got up again.

The current Ling Lan was no longer her usual serene self — her eyes held a limitless amount of killing intent, and she attacked with precision and ruthlessness. This sort of life-and-death scenario did not allow for any carelessness on her part; she was determined not to experience death being torn apart by wolves.

She had already begun circulating her Qi the moment she started attacking, as this was one of her trump cards when charging into the wolf pack. As long as the opponent was not stronger than her, the energy expended in her attacks could be completely recuperated by the circulation of Qi. In other words, Ling Lan would never be in danger of a tragic death by exhaustion.

The alpha of the red-lined wolves watched as its subordinates fell one by one, with no visible effect on the weak prey. Finally, it could tolerate it no longer, and with a howl, it rushed into the fray.

The alpha of the red-lined wolves was much bigger than the other red-lined wolves;

its body could be compared to that of an adult bull. It approached with bloodshot red eyes — the countless deaths of its subordinates by Ling Lan's hands had sent it into a towering rage.

The other red-lined wolves backed away in the face of their alpha, leaving the battlefield completely up to their leader.

Ling Lan exhaled softly. Plans and counterplans flashed through her mind as she considered whether she should try to draw out the fight with this alpha wolf, so she could while away a bit more time.

But the red-lined alpha wolf was not going to give Ling Lan the time to think, pouncing at her the moment it got within range. It swung its thick claws at Ling Lan, trying to tear this detestable prey in half.

Ling Lan leant back slightly, just enough to avoid the alpha's claws, when suddenly, the wolf's claws mysteriously lengthened.

Ling Lan's heart skipped a beat, and she quickly pushed on her two feet to spring back further, narrowly managing to avoid those sharp extendable claws.

After evading the attack, Ling Lan struggled to regain her balance as she peeked at the alpha's claws. All four of the alpha's claws had extended by approximately 10 centimetres. Who knew that the red-lined alpha wolf within the learning space would have the ability to retract its claws? This surprise had almost made her take some unintended damage.

The alpha wolf wasn't going to give Ling Lan time to adjust, immediately lunging at her once again, and its main weapon this time was its sharp teeth.

Ling Lan met it with a fist, but this time she felt as if she was hitting a solid rock. Her fist throbbed in pain, and the resulting aftershock of energy pushed her back by five to six paces.

On the other hand, Ling Lan's punch didn't seem to have caused much damage to the alpha. The alpha landed squarely, and when it saw Ling Lan falling back, it charged forward once again with all its might, jaws wide open in preparation for a savage bite.

"Rabbit Sky Leap!"

Chapter 65

A Rip-Off of a Mission Clear Reward!

Ling Lan's right arm was numb so she could no longer use it to attack, so she decisively threw out a back kick, using the technique she had trained diligently to obtain in the past five years — the Rabbit Sky Leap. And now she would finally be able to test it out for real, and see how much power this skill, which had cost her 10 honour points, truly wielded.

With a loud "Bam!", the red-lined alpha wolf was sent flying amidst its own pained cries. It smashed onto the ground and actually rolled another five to six metres due to the remaining energy behind the blow before coming to a stop.

Ling Lan put down her right foot, her eyes full of satisfaction. As expected, the Rabbit Sky Leap was really powerful — the strength of her own fists had not been able to do much damage to the red-lined alpha wolf, but the Rabbit Sky Leap could, and it looked like the damage value it dealt was significant.

According to Ling Lan's calculations, the Rabbit Sky Leap technique could increase her leg strength by as much as five times — and this was just at the basic level of mastery. If she continued to practise and became even more proficient with the skill, it would definitely become one of her killing techniques.

At this moment, the red-lined wolf tottered upright again. As its head was hit directly, it seemed to still be somewhat dazed. The red-lined alpha wolf shook its head to try and dispel the dizziness, but this move only made it fall over again.

The condition of the red-lined alpha wolf caused the red-lined wolf pack to fall into disarray. The wolves were all howling at the sky worriedly, as if asking if their leader was okay.

Still, as befitting one of the reigning kings of the grasslands, the red-lined alpha wolf stood up once again. This time, it seemed to have regained full awareness, and turning to face the one who had kicked it, its eyes were crimson, filled with the need to rip Ling Lan into pieces.

Still, the wild beasts within the learning space had a certain level of intelligence — Ling Lan's kick had shown the alpha wolf that this small prey before it was not as weak as it seemed. It knew that it would not be able to handle the prey on its own, and so the red-lined wolf cast away its dignity, and howled up at the sky.

Very quickly, the wolves all around took up the howl as well, and the wolf packs in all directions bowed down collectively. From different directions and from different wolf packs, four huge alpha wolves emerged. They were like kings, strolling out proudly from among their subjects, slowly approaching Ling Lan.

Apparently, the red-lined alpha wolf had called out for assistance from the other alpha wolves.

Ling Lan's expression turned frigid. Although she didn't have to continue duking it out with the sea of wolves, the combined attack of five alpha wolves was also nothing to sneeze at. She really feared that she might lose her life under the fangs and claws of these alpha wolves as soon as the fight began.

"Interesting, didn't expect her to have that skill." Number Five's eyes narrowed in contemplation, a complicated expression on his face as he watched Ling Lan preparing to do battle against the five alpha wolves. Had that skill been her own choice? Or had it been just luck?

At that moment, the five alpha wolves officially began their attack on Ling Lan. With the red-lined alpha wolf as the lead attacker, the other alpha wolves circled around, darting in every so often to try and score a sneak attack. Their movements were well-coordinated, nothing at all like the messy and chaotic attacks of the regular wolves of the wolf pack.

The attacks of the alpha wolves had a sort of beauty to it, unlike the crude savagery of the regular wolves' attacks. The alpha wolves' movements could even be called graceful, though sometimes strange and elusive. But every collaboration between the wolves was just right, causing Ling Lan to be extremely harried as she evaded, almost dying several times in the process.

Ling Lan no longer held anything back. She pushed Qi into her two arms, instantly doubling their strength. Although it couldn't compare to the power of the Rabbit Sky Leap, it was still more than enough to penetrate through the alpha wolves' thick hides and deal them some pain.

Right now, Ling Lan's own body strength was not enough to fight against these alpha wolves — Ling Lan had already become aware of this during her first battle with the red-lined alpha wolf.

The perfectly coordinated attacks of the five alpha wolves gave them the upper edge, but Ling Lan wasn't helpless under these attacks. The powerful Rabbit Sky Leap was something the five alpha wolves had to watch out for because they just couldn't tell which kick was actually a Rabbit Sky Leap in disguise.

Under this scenario, the two sides were actually pretty evenly matched.

Still, the fearsome attacks of the alpha wolves let Ling Lan experience the thrill of dancing with death — she slowly let herself go, subconsciously descending into a pure world of combat, not a single stray thought within her mind. After fighting for a long while, Ling Lan felt a rush of euphoria permeate through her body — the shackles holding her back had finally been broken.

Ling Lan felt as if she had entered a whole new world, where the energy within her body was cheerfully waving at her, as if announcing their return.

Ling Lan knew what this was — it was the shackles she had put on herself previously to control her own strength. Within the past month, Ling Lan had been embroiled in combat training with the Ling family loyalists, all for the sake of restraining her malevolent aura. Even so, Ling Lan was very afraid that her malevolent aura would suddenly burst out, causing her to lose control and harm her family by accident. And so she had cautiously convinced herself, that no matter what the situation, she would not permit herself to release all of her strength in its entirety...

Gradually, this self-hypnosis of sorts became a type of shackle, until finally, Ling Lan found that even if she consciously wanted to, she was unable to unleash all of her strength. Ling Lan didn't know whether to laugh or cry at this result.

Later on, she had sparred with Qi Long, and although she should have been able to defeat Qi Long with a straightforward show of strength, she had found it impossible to bypass her own personal limiters. In the end, she could only keep dragging out the fight until Qi Long had been exhausted for the spar to end.

Naturally, faced with such a frustrating situation, Ling Lan was very unhappy. But unfortunately, she had been unable to resolve the problem, and so had had no choice

but to push it to the back of her mind, and wait for a solution to present itself later. Unexpectedly, at this crucial life-or-death moment, Ling Lan had broken past her shackles, regaining full access to her strength.

The alpha wolves sensed this change in Ling Lan; slowly but surely, they sensed the strength of their opponent grow stronger and stronger — attacks which had only caused minor pain previously, were now actually hurting them to their bones.

Ling Lan didn't know how long she had been fighting the alpha wolves, but she was starting to feel that her Qi circulation could no longer keep up with her energy expenditure. Her stamina was gradually fading, seeming as if it would disappear entirely the very next moment. She should have been anxious and worried by this, but she was uncharacteristically calm — just as if she wasn't the Ling Lan fighting for her life right now, but rather a cold-eyed observer on the side-lines.

Indeed, she had actually entered a strange sort of plane, where the attacks of the five alpha wolves seemed to occur almost in slow-motion. She could actually see a hole in the collaborative attacks of the five alpha wolves, and sensed that if she targeted that spot, she would definitely manage to land a solid hit.

Although Ling Lan didn't know why this was happening, she instinctively knew that this was a precious opportunity. Thus, she absorbed energy through her circulation of Qi once more, sent it running down into her right fist, and then threw a firm punch at the hole she had noticed.

Meanwhile, from Number Five's perspective, Ling Lan's right fist vanished mysteriously all of a sudden, and then a loud smack rang out, and an alpha wolf was sent flying to sprawl on the ground a distance away. However, the alpha wolf wasn't heavily injured and managed to struggle back to its feet, and then with an angry howl, it rejoined the battle once more.

At that moment, Number Five's face was a study in shock. Disbelievingly, he muttered to himself again and again, "How can this be? How can this be? Could it be the zone?"

Even as the thought reared its head, he squashed it. He shook his head forcefully, telling himself to calm down, that what he was thinking was impossible. What child would be so aberrant as to touch on the borders of a zone at six years old? Perhaps it was just a lucky shot by Ling Lan.

Seeing their own comrade being sent flying, albeit just briefly, the other alphas were enraged — this was an outright challenge! They no longer held any of their initial notions of fooling around, deciding to give the fight their all.

Ling Lan still remained calm; she had once again noticed a hole in the defences of the five alpha wolves. Even now she was unsure how her fist had connected with the head of one of the alpha wolves — the area she had aimed for had clearly been an empty space. Her last attack had been half-hearted, tentative as she was only testing it out. But this time, she would no longer hesitate.

"Rabbit Sky Leap!"

Resolutely, Ling Lan used her strongest technique on the hole. Immediately after, a desolate cry rang out — and one of the alpha wolves was seen falling heavily to the ground. A large hole had been ripped open on its belly, and its blood was gushing out like a river... there was no possibility that it would survive.

The Rabbit Sky Leap technique could really be used as a one-hit-kill blow; Ling Lan was extremely pleased. Perhaps there were other skills and techniques much stronger than the Rabbit Sky Leap, but Ling Lan still felt that the Rabbit Sky Leap was much more useful and adaptable. Since the movements for it looked no different from a regular kick, she could hide it when she used it — no one would be able to tell which kick of hers was a Rabbit Sky Leap, so it was an extremely stealthy move.

The wolf who died was the red-lined alpha wolf. All we can say is that the red-lined alpha wolf was just too unlucky — coming on so strongly because it thought it had the upper hand, only to lose its lupine life.

At the death of the red-lined alpha wolf, the red-lined wolf pack started a round of mournful howling and then quickly dispersed. Within the span of two to three minutes, they had all fled the scene.

The four remaining alpha wolves stared at each other for a moment, and then decided to follow the example of the red-lined wolf pack. They swiftly retreated, howling out to their subordinates as they did so.

Ling Lan watched as the wolf packs slowly retreated until they had left her range of sight. Still, she didn't relax yet, staying on her feet for another three minutes. Finally, she could hold on no longer and toppled over to lie down on the ground. Those final

two blows at the end had drained all of Ling Lan's physical energy. She had only remained standing out of sheer stubbornness, afraid to reveal her inability to continue to fight. Only when her body could really take it no longer had she given in to fall to the ground.

If the wolf packs chose to return and rally a second attack on her right now, it would definitely be an easy task for them to make mincemeat out of Ling Lan. Fortunately though, the wolf packs had really departed, so Ling Lan managed to survive by the skin of her teeth.

Even so, Ling Lan was still fearful as she recalled the situation. Once again, she was keenly aware of how important Little Four was to her. Without his comprehensive monitoring, her safety was entirely up to fate and circumstance — Ling Lan really detested this feeling of uncertainty. Of course, most importantly... it was rather lonely without Little Four by her side.

However, Ling Lan's thoughts quickly turned to the sensation she had experienced in the earlier battle. That ability to glean the defensive holes of an opponent with one look, the feeling of having the flow of battle within her hands... that sensation was just wonderful.

Ling Lan laid on the ground and held a fist up to the sky. Although she had no clue what that sensation was, she knew that it came from within her own body. In the fight, both her combat instincts and her physical strength had been pushed past her original limits, progressing one step further.

Was this what was meant by a personal breakthrough? But before Ling Lan could get too caught up in her excitement, a wet-blanket in human form appeared in her sight.

Number Five had materialized out of thin air right above Ling Lan. Peering down at Ling Lan, he grinned widely as he said, "Congratulations, you've cleared the mission."

At the same time, the system's voice rang out by Ling Lan's ear: "Mission completed. Reward — intense training by Number Five obtained!"

When Ling Lan heard the contents of the reward, her gut reaction was that she had been ripped-off. If she had known that this was the reward for clearing the mission, she would definitely have committed suicide right off the bat, so that she would utterly fail the mission. Ling Lan had not forgotten Number Nine's gentle warning... Boo hoo

hoo! Could she have a redo?! Ling Lan really felt like crying, full of regret for what might have been.

However, Number Five didn't give Ling Lan much time to regret her life choices. With another quick grab, he tossed Ling Lan into his own special training area.

Chapter 66

Still Ended Up a Boarder

Somewhere on the planet of Doha, in a top-secret location, someone was reporting the results of their operation through a communicator. "Sir, the people below have sent back the news — we have failed."

"What happened?" The screen was pitch-black, and the disguised voice that came through was cold and mechanical.

"There were way too many people protecting that brat, not just those opposing us, but even the Blades showed up."

"The Blades? Why are they involved?" The other could not understand why the bladed forces would appear here and now.

"Sir, what should we do now?" The caller's forehead was dripping with sweat. His superior was unforgiving of failure — he was deeply afraid that he would lose his head over this.

"Looks like the situation is a little complicated." The bladed forces' involvement was clearly a concern to the other. "Ling Xiao's son... perhaps they are using him as bait now."

"It can't be." The caller just could not believe it. Ling Xiao was the Federation's hero — how could they treat a hero's child so heartlessly?

"Hmph. For their own benefit, what wouldn't the people in power abandon?" The other laughed coldly, tone mocking as he continued, "If Ling Xiao were still alive, and found out that the country he defended with his life was using his only descendant as bait, putting him in danger, he would probably be filled with endless regret."

As if finding his own words rather pointless, the mechanical voice regrouped and commanded sternly, "Forget going after Ling Xiao's son. Using him as bait to draw us out? In their dreams!"

"Understood!" The caller reflexively stood up to receive his orders, however, he was still worried, so he asked, "Sir, that boy is the child of a god-class operator — according to the transmitted data, his potential is excellent. If he is like Ling Xiao, and grows up to be another god-class operator for the Federation, this will be very disadvantageous for our Empire. Shouldn't we just take the risk and eliminate him...?" god-class operators were just too strong beyond belief, capable of deciding the ultimate outcome of a battle if they were present.

The speaker of the mechanical voice picked up on the worried tone of his subordinate, and chided in dissatisfaction, "Didn't you do research on the information regarding god-class operators? Over the last several hundred years, has the offspring of any god-class operator manage to achieve that pinnacle? Even ascending to the level of an ace operator has been difficult for them. Didn't the geneticists of our Empire publicize their research thesis? When a particular bloodline has culminated in a god-class operator, that means that the energy potential within the genes of that bloodline has already peaked. This also means that all the energy potential of that bloodline has been consumed by the produced god-class operator, resulting in his descendants becoming more and more mediocre... Ling Xiao's descendants are done for."

Otherwise, Ling Xiao's son Ling Lan wouldn't have failed to even make the top 10 of the Central Scout Academy. The decline of the Ling family was a foregone conclusion, so they weren't really worth their attention.

This news dropped onto the caller's head like a bomb, sending his mind reeling. If Ling Xiao's son wasn't a real threat to the empire, then why had his superior spent so much effort trying to assassinate Ling Lan?

As if sensing his subordinate's bewilderment, the mechanical voice rang out once more through the communicator, "It has been almost seven years since Ling Xiao's death, but all the military personnel of the Federation have not forgotten this extraordinary god-class operator, still filled with unflagging admiration for him. If at this time, news that his son had been assassinated by official mecha operators of the Federation were to spread... how do you think the military men in service of the Chinese Federation will react?"

The sweat started to flow freely from the caller's forehead. "They may start to suspect that Ling Xiao's death was due to a conspiracy, a sacrifice in the power struggle among the upper ranks of the military — a mutiny may occur within the Federation." Who knew that his boss had been planning to use Ling Lan's death to set up such a large

stage?

"What a pity the opponent also thought of the same thing, and decided to just play along with our trick, choosing to use Ling Xiao's son as a sacrificial pawn to bait us. I think, even if we really killed Ling Xiao's son, the opponent will be able to fabricate evidence to pin the blame on our Empire." The mechanical voice was filled with regret. This exchange was his loss — it was just lucky that he had discovered this early on, and managed to clean up after himself, only exposing some unimportant pawns in the process.

Listening to the analysis of the situation by the mechanical voice, the caller's forehead was beaded with sweat; he had almost ruined his superior's grand plan. He quickly nodded and bowed, saying, "Yes, Sir, I understand now."

"We shall scatter our forces and lay low for now. Don't do anything rash. The matter of the Ling family ends here." The mechanical voice decisively gave up on the operation to assassinate Ling Lan. He just could not let the opponent pin the death of Ling Xiao's son upon the head of the Empire.

Ling Xiao's death had already shown him the fervour of the military men of the Federation. Due to his death, the conflict between the two nations had escalated into an epic long-standing feud, which currently still showed no signs of stopping. If Ling Xiao's son's death became more fuel to the flame, he was afraid that the Empire would become overrun by those military men of the Federation and be utterly destroyed.

"Yes, Sir," responded the caller, before carefully shutting his communicator and turning to relay his superior's orders.

Just like that, the threat towards Ling Lan was resolved. When Ling Lan later became the Federation's star warrior of a new generation, these people would be filled with regret, beating themselves up for not choosing to continue with their assassination operation...

Meanwhile, the commander of the Blades had received news from 413, who had secretly escorted Ling Lan all the way home. The assassination attempt this time had chilled him, even as it infuriated him. He had never expected that the opponent had already managed to secretly control some of the high-ranking people within the federal military.

The band of mecha operators 413's squad had captured and brought in were indeed serving military men of the Federation, but unfortunately, they really didn't know anything and were just a bunch of idiots who had been used.

Still, the commander of the Blades had been able to confirm that the power base of the opponent hidden within the Federation was considerable, and that a bunch of traitors had already been gathered around him. But for now, his greatest worry was for Ling Lan's safety. Ling Lan may have narrowly escaped this time — but what about next time?

The commander of the Blades hesitated for a brief moment, but finally connected to that particular contact number once more... in the end, when he shut his communicator, the tension in his brows had faded and his expression was light and cheerful.

Although that old fellow had mercilessly extorted a substantial sum from him, it was alright as long as his objective had been achieved. At the most he'll just have to take on a couple more strenuous jobs in the meantime, but for the preservation of the bloodline of the Federation, this trouble was worth it!

Early the second day, Ling Lan finally escaped from the torments of Number Five. With low spirits, she levered herself out of bed and washed up, and then rapidly wolfed down her prepared breakfast. There was no helping it — the distance to school was rather far, so she needed to hurry to make sure she had enough time for the journey. Of course, Ling Lan was also considering whether she should look for a place close to the scout academy to live — wasting so much time every day on commuting was not a sustainable plan in Ling Lan's opinion.

Ling Lan decided that she would discuss the matter with her mother when she returned from school that day. Just as she finished her preparations and was about to leave, an unexpected guest showed up on the Ling family doorstep — the dean of the Central Scout Academy.

The dean's arrival was for one purpose only, and that was for Ling Lan to give up her special class right to be a day student. This was because Ling Lan was the only person this year who chose to be a day student, so the dean was concerned that Ling Lan's grades and progress would be held back by this.

Of course, as the academy was the one to request for the student to relinquish this right, the academy promised that Ling Lan could request something else from the academy, as long as the request was within the academy's means.

Although Lan Luofeng was very tempted by this offer, she could not agree. Why had Ling Lan chosen to be a day student to begin with after all? Because of the problem of her gender. If she stayed with someone else, the risk of exposure would be too high — Lan Luofeng could not afford to take the risk.

Even if Lan Luofeng wanted to refuse, she still needed to have a legitimate reason for refusing. This moment fully displayed Lan Luofeng's ability to improvise. In an instant, she actually managed to concoct a believable excuse — she said that ever since Ling Xiao had passed away, she had contracted an extremely severe case of depression. Consequently, she could not bear to be apart from her loved ones for long. If Ling Lan were to board at the school, she would be unable to control herself, and may end up harming herself.

Ling Qin, who was standing to one side, was very cooperative, immediately affecting an extremely morose expression, nodding gravely to affirm that what his mistress said was true. Meanwhile, with a face full of worry for her mother, Ling Lan regretfully declined the dean's kind offer.

Playing the pity card was obviously a smart move, for the dean's expression was awkward and filled with helplessness. Just as the three believed that the dean would give up on his plan, the dean seemed to come to some momentous decision and suggested an arrangement that shocked the three of them.

He actually suggested that Lan Luofeng live together with Ling Lan in the school. And since the academy had the iron-clad rule of not allowing non-staff to live on campus, the dean even went so far as to offer Lan Luofeng a position at the school as a teaching assistant, so that she could legitimately board at the school.

The dean also promised that Ling Lan and her mother could live alone in one of the villas at the school, where they wouldn't be disturbed. On top of that, the dean even specially permitted Lan Luofeng to bring along two servants to help her manage the villa.

With this, there was no longer any reason for the three to refuse. Ling Lan quickly thanked the dean, agreed that she would relinquish her right to be a day student, and

would try her best to finalise the procedures required to board at the school as soon as possible.

Having received a satisfactory answer, the dean was greatly pleased and automatically offered to give Ling Lan the day off so that she could finalise all the procedures today itself. Then, without leaving a trace of his visit, he left, only leaving behind three dumbfounded people who hadn't regained their senses sitting in the living room.

The dean walked out of the Ling family gates, boarded his hover car, and finally dropped his noble bearing to slump in his seat. He wiped the sweat from his forehead, and once again lamented to himself at how difficult the Ling family was to handle. He thought back to the time when he had to persuade Ling Xiao — he had also had to sacrifice a lot then to succeed...

However, he had still managed to achieve what his old friend had asked of him. Although the academy had had to pay a steep price, the result was still wonderful. The dean smiled in satisfaction. He had gotten many concessions from his old friend for this, so it was overall worth it.

Ling Qin was the first to regain his senses. With a face full of joy, he turned to say to Lan Luofeng, "Mistress, this is a great thing! If Young Master Lan lives at the school, her safety is guaranteed."

Lan Luofeng remained uncertain and suspicious, smiling wryly as she said, "Uncle Qin, why do you think the academy is so accommodating towards Ling Lan, even going so far as to open a backdoor like this for her? I'm very worried. Ling Lan had just been ambushed, and now right after, the Central Scout Academy is giving Ling Lan such preferential treatment?"

It should be known that the gates of the Central Scout Academy were not so easily entered. The work benefits offered by the school was unquestionably the best in the Federation, so even a lowly teaching assistant position there was still highly sought after by countless highly-educated people. Lan Luofeng had never dreamed that such a coveted position would just fall into her lap due to her connection with Ling Lan. Of course, Lan Luofeng was not impressed by the position since she didn't need it.

Although the Ling family seemed weak now, it still had a substantial foundation, enough so that both Ling Lan and Lan Luofeng could live N-lifetimes without having to trouble themselves over living expenses.

Lan Luofeng's words made Ling Qin hesitate as well — could it be that this was just another plot against Ling Lan? Ling Qin was beginning to become a little fearful. The assassination attempt and its series of attacks had troubled the heart of the old man, and he hadn't had time to get over it yet.

Seeing this, Ling Lan hurried to remind them, "I hear that the Central Scout Academy has the highest safety ranking, and students are prized most highly by the academy. Ever since the academy has been established, not a single student has ever been harmed on school grounds. Grandpa Ling Qin, is this rumour true?"

Ling Qin's eyes brightened, as if reminded of something, "Mistress, Young Master Lan is correct. The scout academies are run independently of any government or military system, and god-class operators are the ones in charge of protecting them..."

Ling Qin's gaze was passionate and heated; Ling Lan was very familiar with such eyes — some rabid fans of superstars in her previous world had eyes which shined with the exact same type of light.

Ling Lan knew that Ling Qin's passionate reaction was drawn out by the god-class operators he mentioned. What exactly was that all about?

Ling Lan was determined to let Little Four dig up some information on this later on. Suddenly, she realised that she really didn't know much about this world at all. The assassination incident had given her her first glimpse of real mecha, blinding her with obsession for a moment... these past few years, she had just been focused on training hard and had rather neglected all the interesting things in the outside world.

In truth, Ling Lan could not be blamed for this. Some information was actually classified by the government, and Little Four had felt that Ling Lan really didn't need to know about these sort of things at her age, and so hadn't collected these information. As such, Ling Lan naturally wouldn't have known about any of this.

Thus, poor Ling Lan was still unaware that her father was the idol of the military men of the Federation, and that he had been the youngest god-class operator of the Federation.

Ling Qin's words reassured Lan Luofeng, and so she happily ran upstairs to pack for both Ling Lan and herself.

Just like that, Ling Lan did not show up in Special Class-A for the first official day of school. When the homeroom teacher of Special Class-A glossed over the fact that Ling Lan had already applied for the day off, his tone was obviously protective. This stirred up the discontent of the other students in Special Class-A, provoking a flurry of private discussion...

While Qi Long didn't think much of the matter, Luo Lang seemed to have sensed something, but only Han Jijyun had a serious expression on his face...

Boss Lan, who are you really?

Chapter 67

The Impudent Challenger

In the mirror, a little boy was wearing the rumoured military-style uniform of Special Class-A. The bold red, the fitting tailoring, the glittering bronze leather boots that were so polished that one could almost see one's reflection in it, and the leather belt with a metal buckle around his waist — all of it added a dash of charm to the already handsome boy, swaying the heart of the woman beside him, causing her heart to swell with motherly love.

Lan Luofeng framed her face with her hands, expression dreamy as she said, "Lan Lan, you really look so much like your daddy today — so handsome beyond compare."

Ling Lan couldn't help but roll her eyes. Praise her if she wanted to praise her — why did she have to bring up her old man? Could it be that she was praising her on the surface, but was actually thinking about her old man?

Thinking about Lan Luofeng's long previous history of such occurrences, Ling Lan was pretty sure her mum was caught up in her own romantic fantasies again. She decided to disregard the woman, turning to say to Ling Nanyi directly, "Grandma Chamberlain, I leave mum in your care."

Ling Nanyi was Chamberlain Ling Qin's wife. This time, moving into the scout academy, Lan Luofeng and Ling Lan had brought Ling Nanyi along, tasking her with the running of the villa. And Ling Nanyi had then also selected a servant girl who was deadly loyal to the Ling family with an impeccable record to come along with her, to help her with the cleaning of the villa.

With a smile, Ling Nanyi replied, "Young Master Lan, please don't worry."

That done, Ling Lan waved goodbye to them and walked to the villa doors. Just as she opened the door... Lan Luofeng finally shook herself out of her love-dazed state. "Ling Lan, what do you take your mother for? You ingrate!" Lan Luofeng bellowed from behind her. She had just registered what Ling Lan was implying, and her ire was raised.

Ling Lan turned to look back with a smile. "Congratulations, Mum, you haven't become

a complete idiot." That said, she slipped out of the house.

"Crash!" Some unidentified item slammed into the doors, and Lan Luofeng's lion roar could be heard once again. "Ling Lan, just you wait, you'll get it once you get home!"

With a smile on her lips, Ling Lan left the villa behind. She knew her mum was just talk — when she really returned later, her mum would definitely hug her close and kiss her all over her face, almost seeming as if she wouldn't stop until Ling Lan's face was visibly swollen with her love. There was a time when Ling Lan wondered whether this bad habit was something her mum had learned from her dad... but unfortunately she had no frame of reference, and so the truth would never be known.

Ling Lan slowly walked over to the main road which led to this patch of villas. At this dawn hour, there were already quite a few children and teens about, dressed in the same red uniform. Though their ages ranged, the direction they were headed in was the same — towards the learning area of the scout academy.

It turned out that this villa area that Ling Lan was boarding in was specially allocated for the Special Class-A students — from the first grade to the tenth grade, all of them were in this area.

However, very few of these students were walking like Ling Lan. They wore shoes which jetted air out backwards and were flying freely over the main road.

These shoes were called jet-rollers, very similar to the roller skates of Ling Lan's previous world, which had wheels attached to the bottom of the shoes in either two rows or just one single row. However, jet-rollers were even more advanced than roller skates. On both sides of the shoes and the heel area, miniature drivers were installed, which could draw power from the energy storage unit to power the jets. When a certain velocity was achieved, the shoes would lift off the ground along with the person wearing them. Of course, their maximum achievable height was only about 2.5 metres.

Ling Lan was a little puzzled. The school rules did not allow students to use external powers to fly or speed around within school grounds — how could these special class students be so daring to do so so blatantly?

"It can be confirmed that these students are all second grade and above," Little Four jumped out to say.

"Look it up, why can they use jet-rollers in school?" Ling Lan didn't believe that they were so free just because they were in Special Class-A; there must be some other reason.

"Found it! Apparently they used battle points to redeem those jet-rollers, which is why they can use them in school." Little Four was reliable as ever, piggybacking on a random wireless signal to log on to the school intranet, and quickly finding the answer that Ling Lan needed.

"The redeemed jet-rollers are specially customized by Central Scout Academy, tagged with the Central Scout Academy's identification code, which is why they can be used within the school grounds. Other jet-rollers are forbidden — if found to be used, demerits will apply, and the student will immediately be downgraded by one class level." Without waiting for Ling Lan to prompt him, Little Four continued to supplement his explanation.

That's more like it! Ling Lan had just been wondering how the academy could differentiate between redeemed jet-rollers and those brought in from the outside, but Little Four's explanation answered all her questions. She stared enviously at those seniors zooming around, and decided that she would also redeem one when she had the chance later on.

Ling Lan walked to one of the hover car stops servicing the villa areas. The academy was just too vast — if the students were to walk, they would definitely not get to the learning area within an hour. And as new students, they didn't have jet-rollers, so the only way they could save time was to rely on these hover car stops set up by the academy.

Even before she arrived at the stop, Ling Lan could see the long line of people in wait. A little put off, Ling Lan scratched her brow. Looks like she wouldn't be able to take the first few cars, but hopefully she wouldn't be late still. Ling Lan had actually left the house a little late due to Lan Luofeng's fussing.

Ling Lan maintained her current speed as she walked towards the stop. Right then, she heard a familiar voice shouting out from somewhere not far behind her, "Jijyun, Luo Lang, hurry up! We're going to be late..."

It was Qi Long! Ling Lan was extremely surprised; what a coincidence to bump into Qi Long and the others here. A mischievous smirk appeared on her lips. The three boys

still didn't know she had started boarding at the school, so they probably wouldn't expect to bump into her here so early in the morning.

Sure enough, Qi Long didn't notice that the person walking in front of him was Ling Lan. Just as he was about to zoom past Ling Lan, she stuck a foot out in his path.

"Qi Long, watch out!" From behind, Luo Lang could see this very clearly, but because he was too far away, he couldn't do anything to stop Qi Long aside from yelling out to him, hoping that he would notice in time.

Qi Long truly had the intuition of a wild beast — Ling Lan had stuck her foot out at the most perfect timing to catch him unawares, but even so, just before the moment Qi Long would trip, he managed to catch himself in time to draw his feet back enough to just slide by Ling Lan's foot, escaping the fate of being tripped. However, everything happened too fast, so Qi Long's rhythm was still thrown off. His landing was uneven and he stumbled, almost falling down anyway.

"You goddamn bastard..." After finding his feet, Qi Long turned around, raging, fully prepared to teach the sneaky fellow a lesson, but was faced with Ling Lan's cheeky grin instead.

"Boss, it's you!" Qi Long was overjoyed. He took a large step forward and enveloped Ling Lan in a bear hug, before voicing his doubts, "Why are you here?"

Han Jijyun and Luo Lang had also rushed over angrily in the meantime, but at Qi Long's joyful shout, their anger melted away into pleasant surprise. Han Jijyun's eyes were even sparkling as he asked, "Boss Lan, you've decided to board at school?" Seeing Ling Lan here, there should be no other possibility.

Helplessly, Ling Lan said, "I had no choice. The school forcefully cancelled my day study right, so I could only board at the school."

"That's great! Now we can always learn and train together." Qi Long was the most pleased by this; he finally had someone who could keep up with him in a fight. Yesterday, he had sparred with Luo Lang, but Qi Long had not been satisfied at all. Sparring with Boss Lan was still the best, although he would always be thoroughly trounced by Boss Lan.

Han Jijyun and Luo Lang's expressions were also pleased though, and amidst laughter and chitchat, they arrived at the hover car stop. By this time, there was already much

fewer people waiting in line. Han Jijyun flashed his communicator at the stop's sensor, and the sensor responded in an automated mechanical voice, "The hover car you require will arrive in 3 minutes and 20 seconds. Please be ready."

Very quickly, the students lining up before them had all boarded a hover car and left, and their group of four was next. The academy's hover cars were all built for four people, with two seats in the front row and back row respectively, and looked quite like a convertible car from Earth. Their hover car arrived very punctually, 3 minutes 20 seconds later on the dot from the time Han Jijyun had checked. Ling Lan's group of four seated themselves randomly on the two rows and selected the first year Special Class-A classroom as their destination.

They had just arrived at the classroom doors when the preparatory bell indicating the start of class rang out from within the classroom. The children within the classroom immediately found their seats and began their final preparations for the day ahead. When Ling Lan walked in, she drew their curious gazes. Because Ling Lan's was an unfamiliar face, they quickly surmised that Ling Lan was the mysterious student of probable remarkable origin who had taken leave on the very first day of school yesterday.

Han Jijyun signalled Ling Lan to follow him. It turned out that the homeroom teacher had already assigned everyone's seats yesterday, and Ling Lan's seat was directly behind Han Jijyun's, while Qi Long and Luo Lang were seated to the right and left of Ling Lan.

"How did it end up this way?" Ling Lan was very surprised. This arrangement was very convenient for them to converse and interact, but it was just too coincidental for all four of them to be seated together.

With a resigned expression on his face, Han Jijyun replied, "Your seat and mine are according to the teacher's original arrangement, but Qi Long's and Luo Lang's are the results of battle." It looked like Han Jijyun had tried to stop Qi Long and Luo Lang, but had not succeeded.

"What do you mean 'results of battle'?" Ling Lan was curious.

Qi Long piped up excitedly from the side, "After the teacher finished assigning the

seats, he said that if anyone was unhappy with their seats, they could challenge the student who had the seat they wanted. If they won the challenge, then they could switch seats; if they lost, then they'll have to serve the student they challenged for a month. Both Luo Lang and I won."

Ling Lan was speechless. This world was truly a dangerous world — they were all so young, but the teacher was already starting to cultivate their fighting spirit. Looks like she really couldn't take it easy if she wanted to achieve something in this world.

Right at that moment, the bell signalling the official start of class reverberated through the classroom, and an elegant and refined youth sedately entered the classroom. He was their first grade Special Class-A homeroom teacher.

In the new students' first week, there was no official teaching. The first half of the day was taken up by a course teaching them about the academy's rules, while the later part of the afternoon was allocated for physical training and getting used to the academy's training machinery and facilities.

The homeroom teacher of Special Class-A was named Cheng Yuanhang. When he saw Ling Lan, his gaze turned cold, and then he announced to the class, "Yesterday I said that if anyone had a seat they preferred, they could challenge the owner of that seat as they liked. Originally, the activity should have ended yesterday, but because a student was absent yesterday, we could not just end it. So, I'll ask again today — does anyone here want Ling Lan's seat?"

Ling Lan's brow furrowed. Looks like the homeroom teacher didn't like her, otherwise he wouldn't specifically call her out by name.

The students looked at one another, but no one made a peep. Nobody wanted to challenge Ling Lan. Think about it. Challenging a fellow student with unknown capabilities just for a seat that was not that much different from another — and if you lost, you'd have to serve the other for a month... no matter how you looked at it, it just wasn't worth it. Although Ling Lan's rank was only 17, Qi Long and Luo Lang whose rankings were behind him had risen up like dark horses and had shown just how unexpectedly strong they were. The students couldn't help but be wary after that.

Just as Cheng Yuanhang thought no one would challenge, a weak and skinny child stood up and said, "I want to challenge!"

"Lin Zhong-qing?" All the students were in an uproar. The dead-last of Special Class-A actually wanted to challenge the upper middle ranking Ling Lan? Wasn't that just looking for trouble?!

Chapter 68

You've Lost

Ling Lan wasn't particularly bothered by Lin Zhong-qing's impudent challenge, but her follower Qi Long was riled up instead. He felt as if his boss had been looked down upon, so with a loud slap on his table, he stood up and shouted, "Dammit, daring to challenge my boss? You're too cocky! Teacher Cheng, I'm willing to accept his challenge and fight on behalf of my boss."

Qi Long's interruption startled Lin Zhong-qing, but then a trace of glee flashed through his eyes. Perhaps no one else saw it, but Ling Lan did. Of course, all the credit should be given to Little Four who was comprehensively monitoring the classroom. No one's expression within the classroom could escape Little Four's sharp eyes.

Qi Long's unexpected request for battle caused rage to cross Cheng Yuanhang's face. Coldly, he said, "Qi Long, don't test my patience."

Cheng Yuanhang had really been angered. How old were these children? Already forming groups and saying boss this boss that — what do they take this sacred Central Scout Academy for? Cheng Yuanhang was of commoner descent, and had only achieved the success he had today via the cultivation of the Central Scout Academy. As such, he deeply loved the academy, and loathed any bad children that might harm the academy's reputation.

And Ling Lan, Qi Long, and the others in his group, were all bad children in Cheng Yuanhang's eyes. Especially Ling Lan. On the very first day of school, he had already made the dean come personally to request leave for him — Cheng Yuanhang was very dissatisfied by this. The esteemed dean was the person Cheng Yuanhang respected the most. In his opinion, getting the honourable dean himself to come and handle the trivial procedures of applying for leave — this must definitely be due to pressure exerted by the power backing Ling Lan...

Because of this, Cheng Yuanhang privately came to the conclusion that Ling Lan's inclusion in Special Class-A must be due to manipulation of a back door. Against these second-generation rich degenerates who relied on their family background and power, he was full of contempt. Therefore, Cheng Yuanhang had decided to give Ling

Lan a harsh awakening right at the start of today, so that the boy would understand that the Central Scout Academy was not a place where he could dominate just with his family connections.

Of course, Qi Long wasn't content to just step back. Just as he was about to argue the point, Ling Lan stepped out from the side and pressed him back into his seat, signalling for him to stop speaking.

Ling Lan then turned to look at Cheng Yuanhang, and asked serenely, "What do you think, Teacher?"

Cheng Yuanhang gave her two options. "You can choose to accept the challenge, or you can refuse. But refusing means that you automatically give up your seat. Student Ling Lan, what is your choice?"

Ling Lan looked steadily at Lin Zhong-qing, and said, "Since Student Lin wants to challenge, of course I shall accept."

When Lin Zhong-qing heard Ling Lan accept, a complicated expression crossed his face. There was a trace of unease, but more a sense of relief — this was not the typical expression a challenger should have.

"Boss, looks like that midget has an ulterior motive in challenging you." Once again, Little Four had caught on to Lin Zhong-qing's change in expression, and spoke up to caution Ling Lan.

"Ok. Let's wait and see." Ling Lan secretly put up her guard. Although Lin Zhong-qing looked rather weak, she had read N-many amount of novels, comics, and anime, and knew that there were many main characters who liked to pretend to be weak to fool their opponents ¹, who knew if this Lin Zhong-qing wasn't someone like this? Ling Lan kept her attention focused as she continued her vigilance.

Ling Lan's acceptance of the challenge caused all the first year Special Class-A students to become excited. Under Cheng Yuanhang's lead, the whole class came to one of the combat halls within the academy.

Walking up to the Information Input Station within the main hall, Cheng Yuanhang personally keyed in Ling Lan and Lin Zhong-qing's battle request, and under 'Nature of Combat', he selected the option of 'Open Arena'.

Pensively, Ling Lan glanced at Cheng Yuanhang. Looks like this teacher was really against her — it wasn't just her imagination.

This wasn't the first time Ling Lan had come to this combat hall. On registration day itself, she had already requested a fight here before together with Qi Long. Thus, she knew very well that there were many options under 'Nature of Combat', ranging from 'Closed and Private', 'Closed Small Arena', 'Semi-Open Small Arena', 'Open Small Arena', 'Closed Arena', 'Semi-Open Arena', to 'Open Arena'...

Any option with 'closed' meant the fight would be private and hidden, rejecting any viewing audience, just like her spar with Qi Long. Back then, they had chosen a 'Closed and Private' battle, while this battle between her and Lin Zhong-qing was actually best suited for the 'Semi-Open Small Arena' option.

A 'semi-open' battle would open a unique combat room, and audience members would need to have the room's passcode to enter. They would just have to let the Class-A students know the passcode, then they would have been able to fight a match without any outside disturbance. In that situation, even the side who lost wouldn't have his embarrassment broadcast to the public and lose face.

But an 'open' fight was different — this type of battle was open for viewing for all students within the Central Scout Academy. Furthermore, before the fight, the combat hall would even do a comprehensive announcement. As such, open battles were usually only used during the ranking battles every six months, extremely rare under normal circumstances.

Sure enough, the news of the Open Arena battle was announced repetitively by the combat hall, drawing all the other students who were here for their own individual practice to the side of their ring. When this impromptu audience saw that there were two new students on the stage wearing eye-catching red clothes, they knew it was a fight between Special Class-A kids. Pleasantly surprised, they started discussing the fight in earnest, and the atmosphere around the arena became even livelier.

Quite a few students even turned on their communicators so they could contact their good friends to come spectate as well.

Ling Lan and Lin Zhong-qing were currently standing on the left and right side of the stage respectively, facing each other. In contrast with Ling Lan's calm composure, Lin Zhong-qing looked extremely nervous.

Cheng Yuanhang looked at the two people on the stage and asked them, "Are you two ready?"

The two nodded in confirmation, and Cheng Yuanhang issued the command, "Battle, start."

Lin Zhong-qing heard Cheng Yuanhang's call to start, but he didn't choose to attack immediately. Instead, he retreated swiftly, putting some distance between him and Ling Lan.

"What is he trying to do?" asked Little Four in confusion.

"We'll know when we fight. By the way Little Four, while I'm fighting, don't make any sound to distract me," reminded Ling Lan worriedly.

She still remembered the time a while back when she had been going through combat training with the Ling family loyalists. Due to Little Four's importune interruption, she had been struck heavily by one of the loyalists, almost gaining a serious injury. Fortunately, the Ling family medicinal bath and the Qi exercises were very reliable, supporting Ling Lan so she didn't have any lasting damage. Still, that one time was enough to scare Ling Lan half to death — it turned out that her life was still not guaranteed.

Little Four immediately pulled an imaginary zipper across his mouth in response, signalling that his lips were sealed. He would definitely not cause Ling Lan any trouble.

Ling Lan activated her Qi circulation, and could instantly feel all her senses heighten. When she looked at Lin Zhong-qing once again, she had the feeling as if the entire course of the battle was within her grasp... it was glorious.

This was also part of the results of two nights of training under Number Five — a newly discovered ability. Although it had only been two nights in real time, due to the time rate conversion, Ling Lan had actually been tormented viciously under Number Five's hand for a little over two months, almost driving Ling Lan up the wall.

Luckily, this ability had progressed from its erratic functionality based on her mental condition, to its current stable functioning of working 5 to 6 times out of 10. Ling Lan's suffering had been worth it.

The next second was it! Ling Lan's intuition told her that Lin Zhong-qing's attack was

coming.

Sure enough, of the two people facing off, Lin Zhong-qing was the first to attack. He swooped in abruptly, and his angle of attack was a tricky one.

Many of the higher grade students nodded in approval when they saw Lin Zhong-qing's attack. Lin Zhong-qing's timing was spot on as well — the time he attacked was the precisely the point when a human's mental focus would wane after intense concentration; it was when people were the slowest. Moreover, his attack stance was also great, not just any regular combat art.

However, Ling Lan's reaction shocked and awed the watching students. As if well-prepared, Lin Zhong-qing's attack only made her move a tiny step, and with a slight tilt of her body, she had easily dodged his attack.

"F*ck, this kid is just too confident in himself. Actually choosing to dodge in such a narrow range, isn't that too much?" The older students were all rather stunned, and started criticizing Ling Lan for being too reckless in her evasion movements.

Qi Long and Luo Lang looked at one another, and read the shock and surprise on each other's faces. They knew very well that using the smallest angle possible to dodge was Ling Lan's specialty. This was definitely the most energy efficient way of dodging, but only Ling Lan would dare to do so. Qi Long and Luo Lang didn't even dare to try — this was closely related to confidence and ability, and they just weren't at that level yet. However, what shocked and surprised them was not that they were familiar with this evasion move, but because they had sensed that Ling Lan had an even deeper understanding of this type of small-range evasion now, which made her movements look extremely graceful and natural.

Lin Zhong-qing's first strike struck air, but he didn't retreat directly, choosing to follow up with a flurry of combo punches, moving forward with the determined air of wanting to defeat quality with sheer quantity ². Unfortunately, Ling Lan's strength was really just too far above him — this sort of tactic was no problem at all for Ling Lan.

Gently swaying her body, Ling Lan swiftly dodged all of Lin Zhong-qing's combination attacks, and somehow, she found herself once again in that strange state she had achieved during her fight with the five alpha wolves. This state was still currently not under Ling Lan's control, so whether she could enter it or not was really up to her luck.

Once she entered this state, all of Lin Zhong-qing's attacks became weakness after weakness in Ling Lan's eyes. With just one punch, she would be able to knock Lin Zhong-qing down... it's just, now, seeing Lin Zhong-qing's desperation as he attacked with clenched teeth; his rage and stubbornness made Ling Lan decide to just wait a little longer.

Lin Zhong-qing's boxing skills only consisted of a few moves, and after Ling Lan saw the second repetition of the attack pattern, she knew it was time to end this.

Ling Lan did nothing other than make a simple fist, and throw it out firmly at the largest weak point in her eyes.

Bam! Ling Lan's fist smacked into a soft ball of flesh, and then that thing was sent flying out like a cannonball, to land heavily on the arena floor.

With just this punch, Lin Zhong-qing had been hit, and was now lying still on the ground without any sign of getting up.

All the observing students were gobsmacked. Was this not a battle between two Special Class-A students, but rather a battle between a Special Class-A student and someone from the regular classes? They knew very well that although Special Class-A had a ranking of 50 spots, all the children didn't really differ much in terms of ability, and were practically on par with each other. But this scene before them shattered everything they knew — was there such a large gap, such as that between clouds in the sky and dirt on the ground, even among the Special Class-A students?

"You've lost," said Ling Lan calmly towards the fellow lying on the stage who was still unwilling to get up. Although her punch had seemed heavy, it definitely would not have done any significant damage to the opponent.

Chapter 69

Ling Lan's Problem

Expression dark, Lin Zhong-qing sprang to his feet and said dejectedly, "It's my loss." However, he quickly raised his head again, and with wide, open eyes, and a face full of tenacity, he added, "But next time, I won't lose to you again." The fight and confidence in his eyes were still present, not at all dampened by this loss.

Contemplatively, Ling Lan looked at him, and then said sedately, "I'll be waiting." This little guy was no fool — with that performance, he had probably drawn the attention of the homeroom teacher.

Sure enough, Cheng Yuanhang started applauding from below the stage, expression approving as he said with a smile, "Not bad, Ling Lan, as expected of one of the higher ranking students in our class." Then, he turned to look at Lin Zhong-qing with an expression of deep appreciation for talent, clearly showing who Cheng Yuanhang truly approved of, and said, "Lin Zhong-qing, your performance was very good. Failure is the mother of success — keep it up, you'll succeed one day."

Hearing this, Ling Lan was speechless — Teacher Cheng, oh Teacher Cheng, when you say this, could you not do it right in front of me? Wasn't this just cursing her to one day lose at Lin Zhong-qing's hands? Ling Lan was currently simmering with resentment.

Receiving Cheng Yuanhang's praise and encouragement, Lin Zhong-qing suppressed the gratefulness in his heart as he replied, "Understood, Teacher. I will work hard."

That's awesome, he had managed to leave a good impression on his homeroom teacher! Lin Zhong-qing gave himself a mental fist-pump. Then, he turned to look at Ling Lan, who was standing across from him with his hands folded before him, and doubt rose in his heart.

Subconsciously, he swept his gaze to the area below the stage and saw Li Yingjie's unconcealed anger at Ling Lan's success in the limelight. At that, his mind settled.

Heaven destroys those who don't look out for themselves!

By this time, Little Four had sensed Lin Zhong-qing's intentions. In the mindscape, he was so angry that he was stomping around, insisting that Ling Lan should teach that horrible punk a lesson — better yet, she should beat him up until his own mum couldn't recognise him. Darn it, actually daring to think of using his boss — did he really think his boss would be so easily taken advantage of?

At this moment, Ling Lan was flipping through the files on Lin Zhong-qing which Little Four had passed to her. She found out that Lin Zhong-qing was a commoner child, and tracing back N-generations, all information indicated that his family was of perfectly normal commoner descent. Lin Zhong-qing's [S] rank body and tier-1 spiritual power were definitely due to a type of genetic mutation. The child was really quite pitiful. For the sake of money and other benefits, his parents had given him to the military as research material.

However, after six years of research, Lin Zhong-qing was determined as the result of a lucky genetical mishap, and so did not have any research value whatsoever in the stimulation of genetic mutation. As a material with no research value, the military was unconcerned about his whereabouts. Thus, Lin Zhong-qing became a member of the Central Scout Academy this year.

For such a person of 3-lacks (lacking family, lacking money, and lacking power), what was it that pushed him to challenge Ling Lan? If Lin Zhong-qing had only continued to maintain a low profile and avoid attention, he could have smoothly completed his ten years of education at the Central Scout Academy, and then be free to choose the future he wanted.

But he had instead chosen to grandstand, and though he had indeed managed to attract the homeroom teacher's attention, the disadvantages were obviously greater than the benefits, and Lin Zhong-qing did not seem like an impetuous person.

Thinking of this, Ling Lan said, "*Little Four, dig a little deeper. I don't think this matter is that simple.*"

Little Four patted his little chest energetically, saying, "*Boss, don't worry, I'll keep a close all-rounded watch on Lin Zhong-qing. I'll definitely find out his secret!*" That said, Little Four scarpered off to write out his comprehensive monitoring plan, seeming as if he would not rest until he found out everything there was to know about Lin Zhong-qing. At this moment, Ling Lan made a silent prayer for Lin Zhong-qing. Being targeted by Little Four basically meant that he would have no more secrets to himself.

And so Ling Lan and Lin Zhong-qing's fight ended just like that, but the ripples following the event were not over yet. Among the special class students of the upper grades, rumours spread about a first grade Special Class-A kid who was extremely strong, so much so that his Class-A classmate, who was also within the top 50, had been defeated with just one blow.

Everyone began to anticipate the ranking battles coming in six months. Every year, the top-ranking student of Class-A had the right to challenge across grades. Who knew how far this first year Class-A student could go? How many grades ahead could he defeat? (These people didn't even consider the possibility that Ling Lan wouldn't be the top-ranking student.) At that thought, the first grade students were keyed up, while the upper grade students were eager as well, ready to teach this arrogant upstart a good lesson. (As the rumours spread, they became more and more twisted, finally skewed in such a way that Ling Lan became an extremely strong and capable punk with a terribly arrogant attitude.)

In the fourth grade Special Class-A, a sunny youngster grinned cheekily as he said to his companion beside him, "Shiyu, with such a formidable kid in the first grade, your little cousin brother's position at the top is at risk."

"That brat Yingjie — if he doesn't take a loss, he would really think that he's at the top of the world." Li Shiyu's face was full of contempt as he said this, as if extremely scornful of his own younger cousin.

"You Li family members are really something. If your eldest cousin brother really has no talent, then why do you all insist on making him the first in line to inherit? Causing your entire household to be full of civil strife, so troublesome." The sunshine youngster was grateful that he was born in the Yun family. Although there were also some messy affairs within the family, in comparison with the Li family, those issues were not really issues at all, so his family affairs could even be described as clean.

"Yun Xiu, you look down on my eldest cousin?" Li Shiyu's expression was a little strange as he glanced at him.

Yun Xiu threw a sarcastic look at him, "You think? He's older than you by a few months, but he couldn't even qualify for the Central Scout Academy. I heard he was sent by your grandpa family head to the Li family origin planet of Azure to study at the scout

academy there? Looks like your family head isn't optimistic about this first inheritor of your family."

Planet Azure was a third-rate planet, and was one of those planets that were rather behind on resources; it could not compare at all with the premium capital planet of Doha. Typically, any child with even a speck of talent would never be assigned there.

"Who knows..." Li Shiyu's expression was a little lost. He had not had many encounters with his eldest cousin because ever since his eldest cousin had been born, he had been taken away by Grandfather for personal training. From young, the times they met were fewer than few, countable on just one hand. But even so, he had a very deep impression of this elder cousin brother of his. This profound impression was not due to his status as first inheritor, but was something caused by the very essence of his elder cousin himself.

His eldest cousin had a warm aura about him that invited others close, mysteriously drawing in the people around him. Even if everyone in the Li family said that his eldest cousin wasn't fit to be the first inheritor, he had never seen a trace of resentment or dissatisfaction in his cousin's bearing. That never-changing, warm smile led others to become reflexively happy in his presence.

Although Li Shiyu was also a strong contender for the right to inherit, every time after he met his eldest cousin, the yearning to fight for it would lessen just a little more. Sometimes, he even felt that letting his eldest cousin become the family head wasn't such a bad idea. He would be very willing to help his cousin blaze his way forward, eliminating any rebellious Li family members in his path...

Li Shiyu shook his head, trying to dislodge this notion. His parents would never allow him to do so. He couldn't help but sigh softly. "My eldest cousin, is hard to understand... viewing him as an enemy is very difficult."

Ever since their eldest cousin brother left for planet Azure, he had not returned in four years. Quite likely, Li Yingjie had very little memory of this cousin brother, which was why he was so fixated on getting the inheritor position. If he really met their eldest cousin, he would very likely start gradually losing the motivation to steal this right from him.

"The old grandfather of your family is still going strong anyhow. Any fight over the position will still have to wait for many years later. It's still too early to think about all

this. But, I'm curious. When that self-important younger cousin of yours gets robbed of his rank at the top, what will his expression be like?" Yun Xiu smirked evilly — it was his favourite thing to see the expressions of those pompous brats who thought they were geniuses when they were being ground into the dirt.

"Ho, so your vulgar taste remains unchanged... well, you'll see in six months," teased Li Shiyu, expression light and casual. Li Yingjie wasn't the eldest cousin he didn't want to fight; he would gladly see him become a laughing stock. Alright, so brotherly ties were weak in the Li family to begin with — it's just that this generation had produced an oddball like his eldest cousin brother.

"Leave me alone, aren't you even more vulgar? That's your younger cousin, you know." Yun Xiu smacked Li Shiyu's shoulder in mock anger. Li Shiyu's interest in seeing Li Yingjie make a fool of himself was no less than his own, as expected of someone from the Li family.

Li Shiyu just laughed at Yun Xiu. One really didn't need that many friends, sometimes just having one who really understood you was enough.

Ling Lan's study life had officially begun, or we should say, Ling Lan was getting along just fine. Although the homeroom teacher Cheng Yuanhang had treated her rather harshly on her first day, he had changed his original view of her after seeing her impressive performance, and consequently no longer went out of his way to give her trouble. This was one of the pay offs of her battle with Lin Zhong-qing...

Another pay off was her popularity among the Class-A students. The entire class consisted of boys (Ling Lan's current identity was that of a boy, so we can just ignore this irregular case), and they followed the mentality of 'survival of the fittest'. As such, Ling Lan's defeat of the last place Lin Zhong-qing in one move was greatly admired by all her classmates, so they all wanted to be friends with her. This was because they felt that they themselves would have been unable to pull off what Ling Lan had done.

Of course, there were still some who were averse to Ling Lan, such as the small group that was led by Li Yingjie. They shunned her subtly, and were even a little combative at times.

Regarding this, Ling Lan was apathetic. She had never considered herself as a femme

fatale invincible from all angles — someone who had flowers blooming in her presence, people falling at her feet, who caused havoc on heaven and earth, disturbing gods and spirits alike with her beauty... (Ling Lan was of the opinion that such a woman was definitely not human.) Thus, it was perfectly normal for there to be people who didn't like her. Furthermore, speaking of Li Yingjie, she also didn't like him in return. That smug look of his was just like that of a narcissistic peacock, not cute at all.

Fine, although Ling Lan wasn't a pure 'face-con' ¹, she was a certified 'moe-con' ², only being fond of pretty and adorable children...

However, the fight didn't just bring Ling Lan good results, it also brought along a large problem.

And that was this uninvited guest, Lin Zhong-qing, before her. Even though Ling Lan had refused the month of service he owed her after he lost his challenge, Lin Zhong-qing would not accept it. He still insisted on paying this debt with full diligence. According to Lin Zhong-qing, you reap what you sow — he took the gamble, so he must pay the price — this was what a true man must do.

Chapter 70

The Meaning of Companions!

Lin Zhong-qing's decision was supported by many of the students in Class-A — even teacher Cheng Yuanhang was full of approval — but Ling Lan was aggravated by it.

Bastard! Ling Lan cursed in a very unladylike fashion, extremely disdainful of the people who supported Lin Zhong-qing's high-handed way of doing things. Was causing trouble to others really something a real man would do?

Alright, perhaps if she really was a boy, she wouldn't be so confused by this. But dammit, she was a girl, definitely a girl, forever a girl... if she let a boy serve her in such close range, and if the truth came out, how would she still get married in the future? Ling Lan had still not given up on the idea of getting married as her true self in the future, primarily because she really wanted to give birth to a child of her own to play with.

Adding up the ages of both her lifetimes, she was already an old lady of over 30 years old. Her mental age was definitely at that particular stage where she desperately wanted to get married and have kids. However, Ling Lan was still rational and knew that she could only think about it for now. If she really wanted to have a child, she would still need to wait for this body to mature, and for that, she would still need to wait for about ten years... or was it twenty years?

When the horrific concept of twenty whole years crashed into Ling Lan's awareness, Ling Lan was immediately reduced to tears. How was she to pass her days from now on? Did she really have to wait until her mental age was already at the level of the grand Monkey King, Sun Wukong ¹, before she would be able to wed and have kids?

While Ling Lan was still caught up in her melancholic musings and her endless resentment at the cruel drag of time, completely lost in her own mind, that extremely troublesome person in her life right now appeared again.

"Classmate Ling Lan, here are the notes for the previous theory class that I've spent all night compiling." Respectfully, Lin Zhong-qing came over to hand over a blu-ray USB storage drive from this world. The storage drive was very advanced — one only

had to align one's wrist-communicator to face the drive and turn on the blu-ray function to transfer all the data within the drive into the communicator, to be read at the user's convenience.

Ling Lan wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry at Lin Zhong-qing's good intentions. She really had no need at all for any notes, for Little Four had the ability to record the entire lecture of a teacher, available for her to peruse whenever she needed.

Of course, Little Four's supremacy could only be fully realised within this period of time — when it came to the second half of the year, the first grade students would be allowed to enter the virtual world to study, so they would no longer have to fear being left helpless when they couldn't understand their lessons.

In the virtual world, all the academy's courses had an equivalent virtual counterpart. However, every time one accessed these virtual classes, one would have to spend credits (i.e. money), or use battle points to redeem credits for use.

Lin Zhong-qing's way of doing things was just a troublesome annoyance to Ling Lan, but a particular little brat had been utterly driven up the wall by him.

Within the mindspace, Little Four was throwing a violent tantrum. He felt that Lin Zhong-qing was taunting him, challenging him for his treasured position as Ling Lan's number one follower. The infuriated Little Four lifted the kitchen knife in his hand up high (who knows where he got it from), and swung it around impassionedly. This caused Ling Lan's eyelid to twitch nervously, fearful that Little Four would accidentally cut himself.

Vehemently, Little Four swished the kitchen knife down before him, raging, "I'll kill him. I must kill him. Boss, don't you stop me!"

But I've never even thought of stopping you! Ling Lan would really like to say that, but unfortunately she was afraid that Little Four would start to cry as if tears were free — that amount of tears would certainly be enough to turn her mindspace into an endless ocean... and she really didn't want to drown to death.

Head aching, she rubbed her forehead and said helplessly, "Little Four, are you able to kill him right now?" Hells, how would an incorporeal Little Four kill a flesh-and-blood Lin Zhong-qing? Don't bring up things that are impossible; people will just laugh at

you.

Realizing how idiotic his actions have been thus far, Little Four threw away his little kitchen knife, and pounced on Ling Lan to cling to her thigh as he whined, "Boss, you'll definitely help me, right?"

Was this how the rumoured 'thigh-hugging' ² felt like? Hn, it truly feels pretty good. Little Four rubbed his face against Ling Lan's thigh. Although Little Four was still just a little bean right now, his actions were already moving towards becoming a little pervert.

Unaware that she was being taken advantage of ³, Ling Lan stared at Little Four's shameless actions and a vein throbbed on her brow. She dearly wished she could just grab Little Four and give him a good beating. Unfortunately, she had already promised Little Four that she would not resort to domestic violence, so this wish had to be left unfulfilled. This made Ling Lan feel that she had agreed too hastily in the beginning. If she had only known then how much worry Little Four would cause her, she would definitely never have simply agreed to this condition just to cheer him up then.

However, Little Four's next words thoroughly chased away all of these thoughts from Ling Lan's mind. Cold sweat started to flow freely from her pores, and even her legs felt a little weak. "Boss! Just you wait, the moment he logs on to the virtual world, I'll definitely show him! I'll make sure he dies silently within the virtual world, hehehe!"

Little Four's sinister demeanour caused the hairs on Ling Lan's back to stand — how had she forgotten about Little Four's powers within the virtual world? Finally understanding that Little Four's words were not just idle threats, Ling Lan panicked.

That's right. Although she did feel that Lin Zhong-qing was bothersome, and also wanted to get rid of this bother — that didn't mean she wanted him to die! No matter what, Lin Zhong-qing was still an adorable little kid... although she didn't like this kid so much since he was a little complicated.

She rushed to talk down Little Four, speaking gently to try and dispel this terrifying notion from Little Four's mind. "Little Four, don't worry, that punk is no threat to you. Little Four will forever be the most precious follower in my mind."

At this moment, Ling Lan was unstinting with all the flowery sweet talk she could muster, just so she could get rid of Little Four's killing intent. All this to save a totally

irrelevant 'Villager A' — why was life so hard?

Ling Lan's words made Little Four blush instantly. Happily wriggling his little bottom, he asked coyly, "The most precious, most important, number one follower, right?"

Ling Lan nodded decisively. "That's right. Little Four is my most precious, most important, number one follower — no one can take away your position. So Little Four, you can just enjoy looking down upon the other followers fighting beneath you..."

Er... she had never thought of continuing to collect followers though... why did the conversation take such a weird turn as she was speaking with Little Four? Dammit, it must be Little Four's fault. He must have some strange ability to distort the topic of conversation. Ling Lan resolutely put all the blame on Little Four.

Little Four had no idea what Ling Lan was thinking, but hearing what Ling Lan said, he seemed to come to some realisation. "Boss, I understand now. You mean, those other followers are all followers of this follower!" he said, pointing to himself gleefully.

Ling Lan could almost cry. That wasn't really what she meant, right?! Unfortunately, at that moment, she didn't dare not to nod. If Little Four went crazy again, it could be predicted that half a year later, a large swathe of Special Class-A students would be dead. That would definitely result in a terrifying upheaval, and she would most likely be implicated. Therefore, she needed to stop Little Four now.

Alright, so Ling Lan didn't really have the saintly love of a matron goddess; in the end, she was still just looking out for herself.

Decision made, Ling Lan nodded again firmly. In her mind, a scene formed where Qi Long, Han Jijyun, Luo Lang, and the others were chasing the kiddy Little Four around yelling out 'big bro', while Little Four had his little hands on his waist, laughing long and loud into the sky above.

Ling Lan was instantly pained, sweating internally as she made a silent apology: Sorry dear brothers, for the sake of world peace, and humanity's safety, you all will just have to put up with this.

Because she had never imagined that she would actually bring this "nuclear weapon" down upon this world — she was culpable!

Finally, it seemed that Little Four was hit by Ling Lan's candy-wrapped missiles, and

calmed down. He stated grandly that he would be merciful, and let that Lin Zhong-qing go this once.

When Ling Lan heard this, she immediately turned up the sugar level, cajoling Little Four until he was all smiles again, no longer having any thought of almost losing his precious number one follower position. Only then could Ling Lan relax and turn her attention to the sticky problem of Lin Zhong-qing. When all was said and done, the root of all the problems was Lin Zhong-qing.

This time, Ling Lan no longer wanted to reject diplomatically. She pushed the USB drive back directly, and said coolly, "I don't need it." She had even refrained from putting it more politely — do you see how much effort she was expending just to save this fellow? Even Qi Long and the others had had to pay a 'painful' price for this objective, although they weren't aware of it...

Ling Lan's brusque refusal froze Lin Zhong-qing's expression, but he soon regained his composure. He hesitantly took back the blu-ray USB drive, and pretended not to notice Ling Lan's cool dismissal, continuing to ask with a smile, "Classmate Ling Lan, where will you all be going later?"

There was just one period of Mandarin class in the early afternoon, and then it was all free time until lunch time. As Ling Lan's personal attendant, Lin Zhong-qing needed to know what Ling Lan was going to do next.

Ling Lan merely glanced coolly at him, saying nothing. Ling Lan already had no more patience to continue going back and forth with Lin Zhong-qing.

Beside her, Han Jijyun seemed to have picked up on Ling Lan's mood, so he spoke up, "Lin Zhong-qing, we do not welcome you here, and we do not need your so-called service. We hope that you do not come looking for our Boss Lan anymore."

Being rejected formally and verbally for the first time, Lin Zhong-qing could no longer maintain his smile. His face fell and he looked at Ling Lan with a troubled expression. However, this time he did not continue to cling on with words, but just bowed politely to Ling Lan before he turned and left.

Lin Zhong-qing's abrupt departure puzzled Qi Long. "What does he mean by that? Will he not bother us anymore?"

Uncertainly, Luo Lang replied, "Probably. We've already said it so clearly."

Han Jijyun watched Lin Zhong-qing's gradually departing figure, and his brows furrowed as he said, "Boss Lan, this person... is probably not so easy to chase off."

Ling Lan nodded. "Yes. Him sticking to me is not because he lost the challenge, but for some other purpose."

Han Jijyun was startled. "What purpose?" He had not sensed anything at all, thinking all this time that Lin Zhong-qing was simply doing this so he could fulfil his bet, to show how trustworthy he was and gain some brownie points in the teachers' eyes.

At this moment, Han Jijyun felt a little lost; he had self-categorized himself as the intelligent strategist in Ling Lan's group. He had categorized himself this way because his combat ability was no match for Qi Long's — Qi Long was a natural born fighter, certain to be a high-level mecha operator in the future. Already aware of Qi Long's superior combat prowess, Han Jijyun was mentally prepared, and so wasn't too depressed by it. But he had never expected that Luo Lang, who joined in later on, would also be stronger than him in combat ability. This caused him to abruptly lose his self-set place, so he had no choice but to search for a different position he could fill. Very quickly, he had noticed that their group was still lacking a wise strategist. With regards to this character setting, Han Jijyun felt that he was quite suited to the task. So although he didn't state it outright in front of his companions, his actions and the learning courses he chose all started leaning in that direction, a clear sign of his determination.

However, Ling Lan's words floored him once again. Could it be that he wasn't suited for this character setting after all? The more Han Jijyun thought about it, the more insecure he felt, and his mood dipped significantly.

Seeing Han Jijyun's expression change, Ling Lan felt a headache coming on again. Why did these little fellows by her side all require so much care?

Ling Lan could only deepen her wry smile and say, "Actually, I'm not too sure myself. It's just that every time Lin Zhong-qing looks at me, his gaze gives me that sort of feeling... perhaps I'm just thinking too much."

Although Ling Lan's expression was a little exaggerated to the point of suspicion, those words weren't actually lies. She really still wasn't sure what Lin Zhong-qing's motives

were in trying so hard to get on her good side. However, Ling Lan wasn't anxious. She believed that with the passage of time, she would naturally learn of the other's plan.

Besides, they were all just six year old brats right now, not involved in much power struggles for wealth or political clout. No matter how much Lin Zhong-qing plotted, not much harm could come to Ling Lan. This was yet another reason why Ling Lan was not at all impatient, and could just ignore Lin Zhong-qing.

Ling Lan's words let Han Jijyun temporarily push away the uncertainty in his heart. With a serious expression, he said, "Since Boss Lan has said so, there must be something wrong with Lin Zhong-qing. We need to be a little more careful." Despite Ling Lan's rather ambiguous explanation involving intuition, Han Jijyun decided to put his faith in her full-heartedly, and started cautioning the others to be more alert.

It wasn't just Han Jijyun who trusted Ling Lan — even Qi Long and Luo Lang were the same, nodding firmly to show that they understood.

The unquestioning faith of her companions surprised Ling Lan slightly, and an indescribable swell of warmth rose within her heart. Was this what was meant by the trust of one's companions?

In her previous life, Ling Lan had always been stuck in the hospital, constantly struggling at the border between life and death. She had never experienced what the term 'companion' meant, but now, Ling Lan felt as if she understood it a bit better.

It was soon proved that Han Jijyun's judgement was very accurate — Lin Zhong-qing was not someone who easily backed down.

At noon, Ling Lan and the others had just walked into the school canteen when they heard a familiar voice cry out, "Classmate Ling Lan, here, over here."

Ling Lan lifted her head and looked over, and saw Lin Zhong-qing waving at them enthusiastically with a wide smile on his face, just as if that awkward situation earlier that afternoon had not happened at all. She was thoroughly impressed by Lin Zhong-qing's thick skin. Already having been denied so heartlessly, how could he still greet them so passionately? This child's resilience was really just too strong.

Qi Long and the others looked at one another, unsure how they were supposed to react. All their lives, they've never met such an agreeable child — they couldn't find it in themselves to keep rejecting Lin Zhong-qing in the face of his unreserved smile.

Even the typically cold-hearted Han Jijyun had nothing to say.

Ling Lan exhaled a quiet breath. Fine, she too found it impossible to continue refusing such a resilient child, so she said, "Let's get to know him a little better. The four of us, against one of him — no matter what how you look at it, we won't lose."

These words were unanimously approved by all three of her companions, and so they headed towards the beckoning Lin Zhong-qing.

However, internally, Ling Lan was more vigilant than ever. This Lin Zhong-qing was so unbelievably tolerant — what he wanted must not be trivial.

She couldn't help but sigh again. The children of this world were definitely non-human... even with two lives worth of experience, she could only stay ahead of them by a little. If she compared her true six year old self from her previous world with these children, she would undoubtedly lose all the way to distant Siberia ⁴.

Chapter 71

Lin Zhong-qing's Objective?

The actions of Ling Lan's four-man group surprised Lin Zhong-qing for a beat, but he was then overcome by a surge of joy. In all honesty, when he had greeted them, his heart was pounding, for he was afraid that Ling Lan and her group would just ignore his existence.

Unexpectedly, Ling Lan and her friends were really headed in his direction — this made him suspect for a moment that he was in a dream.

Lin Zhong-qing's tenacity and perseverance had gained him the favour of the simple-minded organism Qi Long; afraid that his sharp-tongued mate Han Jijyun would say something to hurt Lin Zhong-qing, Qi Long hurriedly called out, "Lin Zhong-qing, why are you looking for us?"

Naturally, Qi Long's good will was felt by the perceptive Lin Zhong-qing. With a grateful glance at Qi Long, he said smiling, "I just wanted to tell Classmate Ling Lan that, I've found him a seat."

Although Lin Zhong-qing had been smiling at them all this while, it was normally just a polite facade; but this time, his smile seemed to be somewhat genuine. For the first time, Ling Lan felt that Lin Zhong-qing actually looked pretty cute when he smiled.

Han Jijyun frowned slightly, and his originally cold expression became even colder. Meanwhile, Luo Lang sniffed, as if displeased at Lin Zhong-qing's unnecessary action. It was true though. A red-coat student would never lack for a seat. If they found a seat they liked (as long as the seat wasn't occupied by another red-coat student), they need only walk up to that person, and without having to say a word, the student dressed in a uniform of any other colour would automatically relinquish their seat.

Of course, Ling Lan's group of four would never do such a tasteless thing. The dining area was very large, so there would always be some seats open — they just needed to spend a little time looking that's all.

Lin Zhong-qing was unconcerned with what Luo Lang and the others thought.

Solicitously, he pulled out one of the chairs and said to Ling Lan, "Classmate Ling Lan, please sit here."

Ling Lan looked at his slightly fawning face, and thought back on that slightly sincere smile, and felt her heart soften. So, she did not refuse, sitting on the chair he had pulled out. After all, Lin Zhong-qing was just a six year old child — Ling Lan, who was really a quirky auntie at heart, was truly unable to resist such a little kid.

Seeing Ling Lan take a seat, Qi Long and the others quickly chose a seat before them at random and sat down as well.

Ling Lan's first ever concession to him was obviously a good sign. Suppressing the emotional upheaval within himself, Lin Zhong-qing asked carefully, "What would Classmate Ling Lan and your friends like to eat? Let me bring it over for you all."

'Bring' and not 'buy'! Lin Zhong-qing very clearly articulated to Ling Lan and the others what his bottom line was in terms of service.

Ling Lan cast a searching look at Lin Zhong-qing. This child was just too artful with words and phrasing — he avoided offending them, but also didn't let himself be pushed into a corner. As long as this type of person got a chance, he would certainly become a commendable man.

Ling Lan decided that she would give Lin Zhong-qing that chance. She indicated for Lin Zhong-qing to push his wrist-communicator closer, and then used her own communicator to transfer some credits directly to Lin Zhong-qing. Not much, just 240 credits — the exact amount to pay for six deluxe set meals.

In this era, personal communicators not only could send and receive messages, but were also equipped with the ability to retain personal identification information, bank cards, and other miscellaneous services, truly providing multipurpose convenience.

"Six deluxe set meals, a double portion each for Qi Long and I." Ling Lan pretended not to see Lin Zhong-qing's stunned gaze, tonelessly listing out what they wanted to eat.

Frankly, Lin Zhong-qing could not be blamed for his reaction. Set meals were typically only chosen by children from the commoner families. Any child from a slightly better family background would basically order separate dishes which had an overall better taste.

Lin Zhong-qing did not know that Qi Long's and the others' credits had long ago been confiscated by Ling Lan on the first day of school. Since then, the communicators of the five of them, including Qi Long (as well as the two girls always hanging out with them), had never contained more than 1000 credits.

Thus, their every meal changed from the luxurious spread of delicacies they began with, to the current simplistic set meals, though these set meals were still of the deluxe variety. Even so, this was undoubtedly many brackets below what they were having before.

Of course, this wasn't a baseless decision by Ling Lan. Through Little Four's research, they found that the food groups within the academy's deluxe set meal could fully provide all the nutrition that the children needed. Even Ling Lan and Qi Long, who had extraordinarily high metabolisms, were able to fuel their bodies sufficiently by eating a double portion of said set meal. Of course, Ling Lan would never tell Qi Long and the others that after she went home, she still had to supplement her diet with a gargantuan supper. It couldn't be helped. Ling Lan was a glutton to begin with, and on top of that, every night she would be tormented ceaselessly by Instructor Number Five, so her energy consumption was rather off the scales.

Lin Zhong-qing very quickly regained his composure, and he felt the stirrings of gratefulness within his heart. Was this Ling Lan and the others' strange way of preserving his dignity? He said nothing, only casting a brief complicated look at Ling Lan before nodding heavily and leaving to help them get their food.

Looking at Lin Zhong-qing's departing back, Han Jijyun's frown eased slightly. With a hint of uncertainty, he asked, "Boss Lan, you seem to have some admiration for him?"

Hearing this, Qi Long and Luo Lang turned to look at Ling Lan, and waited for her answer. This would affect how they would treat Lin Zhong-qing — whether he should be considered as a companion or not, the treatment would be completely different.

"Yes, I have some admiration for his tolerance. If we were to switch places, I don't think I'd be able to bend as far as he has." Carrying out one's responsibilities while tolerating shame was not something everyone could do; even Ling Lan, with her two lives of experience, could not say for sure that she'd be able to endure it.

Ling Lan's words caused Qi Long and the others to descend into a thoughtful silence. Lin Zhong-qing's humility had made them forget that he was only six years old just

like them — what kind of experiences had he lived through to have learned to be so tolerant?

Right at that moment, the sounds of a commotion could be heard coming from not too far away. Ling Lan and the others all turned to look, and saw a significant crowd surrounding a lone figure. Among those in the crowd were students dressed in red, as well as those dressed in uniforms of other colours, while the one being surrounded was definitely wearing bright red clothes.

They seemed to be arguing, which greatly surprised Ling Lan and her group. After all, the hierarchy within the school was clear — unless it was an uncompromisable conflict, the students in school uniforms of any other colour would never challenge a red-coat student. For if they were caught by the school disciplinary committee, it wouldn't end well for them.

"It's Lin Zhong-qing," exclaimed Luo Lang in surprise. From his position, he could just see the profile of the red-coat student being surrounded.

"The ones surrounding him seem to include some of our classmates." Han Jijyun had also seen some familiar faces in the crowd, and his frown deepened. Although Lin Zhong-qing was ranked lowest within their class, in last place, his popularity within the class was still pretty good. What reason could there be for him to be in a standoff with their classmates?

"It's Li Yingjie's group," said Qi Long with clear dislike. Ever since Qi Long had helped Li Jinghong brush off Li Yingjie, within the class, the two of them were constantly at odds. Every time they met, they couldn't resist exchanging a few barbed words. If one had to name Qi Long's most hated person within the academy, Li Yingjie would be it.

Right now, in the first grade Special Class-A, there was the incipient formation of two clear power bases. One of the power groups was Li Yingjie's — having the prestige of being at the top of the rankings, he naturally drew a portion of the students to his side. Meanwhile, the other power group was Ling Lan's party. In contrast with Li Yingjie's abstract rank, the strength displayed by Ling Lan's one-move defeat of Lin Zhong-qing was much more persuasive. Many students did not really acknowledge the legitimacy of Li Yingjie's ranking — after all, part of it was just based off interviews, and not truly earned through real battle with other students. This situation was very vexing for Li Yingjie, causing jealousy and hate against Ling Lan to rise within him. He believed that it was Ling Lan who was hindering his steps towards uniting the first grade Special

Class-A under his rule.

After some thought, Ling Lan said, "Let's go find out what's going on."

Lin Zhong-qing was currently on an errand for them after all; it was the morally right thing to have a little concern for him.

The four of them walked over to the scene of the commotion and heard the surrounding students in lively whispered discussion. After listening for just a moment, the four of them had gotten a rough idea of the situation.

It turned out that when Lin Zhong-qing was passing by Li Yingjie's group, he had been stopped by one of the lackeys dressed in white. The lackey had ordered Lin Zhong-qing to go see Li Yingjie for a talk. Although Lin Zhong-qing's family background was common, and he was in last place within Special Class-A, he still had the pride of a red-coat student. How dare an insignificant white-coat student order him around with such a tone? He naturally did not respond well, refusing tersely without any concern for politeness.

If that lackey had just stopped there, this matter would have been swept away just like that. Unexpectedly, the lackey had brashly grabbed hold of Lin Zhong-qing. Enraged, Lin Zhong-qing had immediately sent the white-coat lackey flying with one kick.

Lin Zhong-qing's actions were taken as provocation by Li Yingjie's group, who all jumped up in anger and surrounded him, demanding that he apologise. And so this scenario was the result!

Right then, Lin Zhong-qing's expression was extremely dark — if it wasn't for his extraordinary tolerance, he most likely would have already started throwing punches, and this standoff wouldn't have happened.

The appearance of Ling Lan's group of four made Lin Zhong-qing's expression lighten a little, a trace of astonished delight flashing through his eyes.

On the other hand, when Li Yingjie saw Ling Lan and her group, his expression darkened noticeably, looking a little grim, but was mostly disgruntled. It looked like he was unhappy with Ling Lan's group butting in.

Suddenly, Ling Lan's steps paused. With a strange expression, she looked at Lin Zhong-qing, a possibility flashing rapidly through her mind.

Was Lin Zhong-qing's tolerant behaviour these past few days just so he could depend on her to handle Li Yingjie and his group?

When Ling Lan stopped, Qi Long and the other two stopped as well. Although they didn't know why Ling Lan had stopped, it was already a habit for them to follow Ling Lan's movements, so they also stopped without hesitation.

Seeing Ling Lan's group stopping still, Li Yingjie's expression eased a little. He was very pleased at Ling Lan's understanding of the situation. He really didn't want Ling Lan to come interfere in his plans at this moment, and Lin Zhong-qing was his first target.

In contrast, when Lin Zhong-qing saw Ling Lan staying put, his expression changed. He could vaguely sense Ling Lan's intent to just observe from the side-lines, and this troubled him. His initially somewhat calm expression dimmed significantly, and there was actually an almost unnoticeable trace of despair in his eyes.

Ling Lan frowned deeply, troubled and a little puzzled. If Lin Zhong-qing could thicken his skin and suck up to her, then why couldn't he do the same with Li Yingjie? Could he have some other unknown reason for this?

With a shift in thought, Ling Lan decided that she would help out Lin Zhong-qing this one time. After all, doing so was no skin off her nose — she was already on bad terms with Li Yingjie anyway.

Her halted steps resumed once more... Ling Lan's actions rekindled Lin Zhong-qing's deadened and hopeless eyes, and there was even a hint of gratefulness within his newly brightened gaze.

Chapter 72

A Response Which Exceeds Expectations

Ling Lan moved, and the three followers behind her moved with her. Very quickly, they were all standing before Li Yingjie.

"Lin Zhong-qing, why haven't you bought the set meals?" Ling Lan's tone was brusque.

If he wanted to borrow her strength, then Lin Zhong-qing should understand that this strength was not so easily borrowed. What needed to be paid still needed to be paid — Ling Lan had no intentions of working for free.

Ling Lan's words settled Lin Zhong-qing, and he responded, "Classmate Ling Lan, I'm sorry for making you wait." He swept his gaze towards Li Yingjie's group as if telling Ling Lan that they were the culprits stopping him from buying the food.

Ling Lan obligingly followed Lin Zhong-qing's gaze to cast her attention upon Li Yingjie's group, and with affected surprise, she quirked a brow and said, "Oh? It's Classmate Li! What's up? Do you all have some business with Lin Zhong-qing?"

Ling Lan's surprised look was so obviously faked that Li Yingjie's face immediately flushed with anger. Ling Lan had clearly seen him here from the start but was so blatantly lying. Through gritted teeth, he said, "Oh, so it's Classmate Ling Lan. I do have some business with him." If Ling Lan wanted to pretend, then he would play along and pretend as well — he was sure he could pretend even better than Ling Lan.

Ling Lan nodded, and said almost casually, "Then let's do this on a first come first served basis then. Classmate Li, why don't you wait till Classmate Lin has completed my requests first before coming to look for him again..." As if suddenly thinking of something, Ling Lan added, "A month later sounds about right."

A little coyly, she continued, "Classmate Lin lost to me, you see, so no matter what, he needs to serve me for a month first. So sorry to let you down."

Ling Lan's words almost caused Li Yingjie to spew blood. This was basically telling him that Lin Zhong-qing was now under Ling Lan's protection.

Li Yingjie could no longer maintain a friendly appearance. With a frigid expression, he said lowly, "Ling Lan, you're really going to oppose me now?"

Ling Lan's expression was innocent as she asked Lin Zhong-qing, "Classmate Lin, do you want to stop carrying out the terms of the bet you lost when you lost the challenge?"

Lin Zhong-qing shook his head firmly. "No."

With a helpless look on her face, Ling Lan shrugged at Li Yingjie. "Classmate Li, it's not that I want to oppose you, but Classmate Lin isn't ready to break his promise." Ling Lan's expression seemed to imply that Li Yingjie was barking up the wrong tree by being angry at her.

This performance by Ling Lan made Li Yingjie even angrier, yet he couldn't find any way to refute what Ling Lan had said. His face flushed an even deeper red in bottled anger.

Ling Lan was unconcerned with the near-exploding Li Yingjie. Turning her head, she said to Lin Zhong-qing, "Why are you still standing there? We're almost starving to death."

"Yes, Classmate Ling Lan, I'll bring your lunches over immediately." Ling Lan's response had already surpassed Lin Zhong-qing's expectations — he was a little groggy, unsure why the thus far cold and unfriendly Ling Lan would help him this much. Initially, he had only wished for Ling Lan to confirm that he was serving him, just so he had an excuse to refuse Li Yingjie.

Ling Lan was satisfied. She directed a slightly apologetic smile at Li Yingjie, and then led Qi Long and the others away from the area.

This almost dismissive attitude was quickly driving Li Yingjie mad — he wanted to stop Ling Lan and teach him a good lesson, but he just damnably couldn't find a usable excuse. Right then, he hated the fact that he was within the Central Scout Academy. If this were the outside world, he would definitely use his power and authority to 'take care' of this detestable, arrogant bastard before him. (Right now, in his eyes, even Ling Lan's most normal attitude would be taken as a personal taunt.)

When the boss gets mad, it was naturally up to the followers to help the boss take out his anger. A lackey-boy dressed in a white school uniform leapt out, but knowing that

Ling Lan's group wasn't something he could handle, he didn't dare to say anything to them. Instead, he set his sights on the seemingly more bulliable Lin Zhong-qing. "Lin Zhong-qing, don't you dare leave! If you leave, I'll make it so your life's hell!"

Perhaps this punk had gotten used to being an arrogant little sh*t since young, for his first impulse was to threaten. Thing was, his threat made all the watching students burst out into laughter, and of course, this laughter was filled with mockery.

This mocking laughter caused the white-coat lackey's face to flush and pale erratically. In that moment, he just couldn't figure out why he was being laughed at.

Actually, he couldn't be blamed for this. It wasn't unusual for new students who had just entered the Central Scout Academy to find it difficult to adapt to their new roles within the school. Particularly those second-generation young lords who were used to getting their way from young — it was even easier for them to make a mistake. Only once they had tasted the bitter consequences would they understand that the world within the Central Scout Academy was entirely different from their previous world.

In this world where the strong dominate and everything was based on personal strength, the distinction between the elite and the humble was represented by the colour of their school uniforms. Every six months, the internal academy re-ranking was the chance for the students to find a new foothold in life.

Therefore, how could a white-coat student threaten a red-coat student? The school disciplinary committee would make them understand that the results of violating the colour hierarchy was not something they could bear.

Li Yingjie glared fiercely at that follower who still didn't know that he had violated the school rules. No matter how much Lin Zhong-qing was ignored within Special Class-A, he was still a red-coat student — how could a white-coat student threaten a red-coat student so brazenly? If the academy administration found out, this follower of his would be in a world of trouble.

Lin Zhong-qing turned his head, casting a scornful look at that white-coat student. "I would really like to see, how exactly you would make my life hell." Although he was meek by necessity within Special Class-A, this didn't mean that he would take bullying from the students of the other classes. The red clothes he was wearing represented his status, his dignity.

The white-coat lackey still looked as if he wanted to say something when Li Yingjie said curtly, "He Fei."

Sensing Li Yingjie's rage, the white-coat lackey, otherwise known as He Fei, didn't dare to say anything more.

Li Yingjie looked at Lin Zhong-qing, and asked coldly, "Lin Zhong-qing, you've really decided?" Lin Zhong-qing's family background was common, and his strength wasn't outstanding in Special Class-A, which was why Li Yingjie had initially set Lin Zhong-qing as his first target. He had intended to make Lin Zhong-qing his subordinate, and then slowly tame the other Special Class-A students until he finally managed to achieve full control of Class-A. What a pity this Lin Zhong-qing was such a stubborn fellow — actually ignoring his invitation from the very beginning, until his direct refusal at the end. Not just that, Lin Zhong-qing had aligned himself with the group of people he hated the most.

"Yes, I, Lin Zhong-qing, always mean what I say." Lin Zhong-qing's demeanour was tough and intractable, leaving no retreat for himself. If small obstacles like this could cause him to shrink back, he would never have been able to survive those couple of years in the laboratories. While other children were growing up under the care and affection of their parents, he had already learned how to think for himself, knowing that he would have to depend on himself to obtain the life he wanted.

"Fine, in that case, I won't force the issue." Li Yingjie was straightforward when it came down to it; he truly let go of the idea of recruiting Lin Zhong-qing to his side right then. With a cold expression, he turned to his band of followers and said, "Why are you all still standing? Sit down and eat."

All of his followers were students with uniforms of other colours, so of course they didn't dare to ignore Li Yingjie's orders. They all quickly sat down and began eating.

No longer surrounded, Lin Zhong-qing finally released a sigh. Having Li Yingjie give up on his own was the best outcome for him. Still, he didn't let his guard down yet, afraid that Li Yingjie was only distracting him with empty words, but was actually planning to deal with him privately.

Lin Zhong-qing knew very well that, with his current abilities, he could not stand up to Li Yingjie. The principle of 'survival of the fittest' was protecting him, yet placing him in danger at the same time. The moment Li Yingjie decided to go after him, he

would definitely be in trouble. This was the reason why he was willing to stoop so far to insinuate himself into Ling Lan's group's favour.

Indeed, from the very first day of school, Li Yingjie had already set his eye on Lin Zhong-qing. Meanwhile, Lin Zhong-qing had no intention whatsoever of becoming anyone's follower — six years of life within a laboratory had been enough; he wasn't about to so easily let go of the precious freedom he had regained. Yet, he couldn't stand up to Li Yingjie with his own strength. And so he had cracked his head trying to think of a way to help him out of this mess...

Initially, Lin Zhong-qing had been banking on Qi Long or Luo Lang. Their challenge battles on the first day to get the seats they wanted had shown Lin Zhong-qing just how strong they were. They had respectively managed to defeat the initial rank 5 and rank 8 of the class without much trouble, suggesting that their strength was on par with the top 3 of the original ranking. However, he had then inadvertently heard Qi Long and Luo Lang talking about their absent boss Ling Lan, and changed his mind.

Since that absentee had the ability to be the boss of these two formidable students, Ling Lan's strength must not be any weaker than that of Li Yingjie's. As long as he could borrow some of Ling Lan's power, he should be able to escape the clutches of Li Yingjie. And so, this had led to his challenge towards Ling Lan.

From the very beginning of the challenge, he had already known that he would lose. However, what he wanted wasn't victory, but to lose the challenge so he could obtain the 'punishment' of serving the other for a month. A month's worth of buffer time was sufficient for him to grow and improve so that he could find a better way to handle Li Yingjie.

The result of all this strategizing was worth it! Although Lin Zhong-qing wasn't sure if Li Yingjie had truly let go, he could at least avoid Li Yingjie's outright forceful manoeuvring, having earned some breathing space.

Lin Zhong-qing, who was waiting for the service robot to deliver the set meals, thought about all that had happened thus far. He clenched his fists, eyes shining with a fierce light. As long as he had enough time, he would no longer let anyone be in a position to threaten him again. An intense desire to grow stronger blazed high within Lin Zhong-qing's heart.

Meanwhile, at that moment, Ling Lan, who had been waiting at the dining table for Lin

Zhong-qing to bring the set meals over, was talking with Qi Long and the others when, suddenly, her expression tightened minutely, but the change was quickly smoothed away. Her strange expression lasted for only a microsecond, and had not been picked up by Qi Long or any of the others.

"Little Four, enlarge and dissect that expression of Li Yingjie's..." Ling Lan ordered Little Four within the mindscape.

"Yes, Boss!" Little Four was very excited — finally, it was his chance to shine again! He must live up to the title of number one follower after all.

In the mindscape, the trace of vicious anger in Li Yingjie's eyes was enlarged by Little Four, and then it was studied closely — up, down, left, right, near, far, and from multiple angles. After much comparison and checking, it was confirmed that the target of that gaze was Lin Zhong-qing...

"Boss, what do we do next?" Little Four seemed ready to stir up some trouble.

Ling Lan rolled her eyes at him. *"Do what? Doughnut¹! Just go back and rest."* Since Li Yingjie's target was Lin Zhong-qing, then she wasn't going to spend time worrying about it.

Ling Lan was not a saint. Lin Zhong-qing? Helping him once was already her being merciful. Subsequently, whether or not he could tide the waves was all up to himself.

Chapter 73

Ling Lan's Crisis!

Time flew by, and very quickly, five months had passed. The atmosphere within the Central Scout Academy started becoming restless, for the mid-year wide-scale ranking which would decide the fate of the students for the next six months was about to begin. For the sake of doing well in this critical ranking, all the students in the Central Scout Academy were hard at work making their final preparations.

Ling Lan had passed these past few months uneventfully — not standing out, but not being lost in the masses either. However, after Lin Zhong-qing's challenge, Ling Lan hadn't fought with anyone else again. Even during physical combat class, when her classmates would spar with one another to improve, Ling Lan had also refused to fight.

Of course, at the start, in the first month after school began, Ling Lan would still enter the combat hall to hold sparring practices with Qi Long, Luo Lang, and Han Jijyun. But these practices hadn't gone on for long when, in one of the later battles, Ling Lan had lost control and seriously injured Qi Long by accident. After that incident, Ling Lan had adamantly refused to spar ever again, only allowing Qi Long and the other two to spar with one another.

Honestly, it wasn't that Ling Lan didn't want to spar and exchange tips with her friends... She had her own considerations for this. Because — she had discovered that, when going through the Number Five's most recent so-called 'Ultimate Training Method', a strange fluctuation would appear in her spiritual power after every night of training she endured. As time went by and the nights accumulated, this strange fluctuation just got stronger and stronger. She had been constantly nervous, wondering what this strange phenomenon would bring, but no changes appeared in her daily movements, so she could only set the matter aside temporarily.

But gradually, she realised that whenever she was fighting, especially when she entered attack mode, it was all too easy for her to descend into a bloodthirsty frenzy, and she would be filled with the desire to destroy everything in sight.

In the beginning, she had still been able to contain this desire, so she thought that she was strong enough to overcome these negative emotions caused by the insane

training. However, with the passing of time, she found it harder and harder to control the force of these negative emotions. She started having doubts, wondering if something had gone wrong with her spiritual state.

After injuring Qi Long, Ling Lan finally understood. There was indeed something wrong with her — her spiritual power had gotten out of control. Number Five, who was said to have driven countless talents insane, had similarly caused Ling Lan to develop a spiritual issue after tormenting her for a month.

Thus, Ling Lan no longer dared to join in the fights. She was afraid that she would really kill Qi Long and the others next time. If that happened, it would definitely be too late for regrets.

Qi Long and the others knew why Ling Lan refused to fight, so when other students challenged her, Qi Long and Luo Lang had stepped forward. They said that if the students wanted to challenge their boss, they would have to get through them first as they were Ling Lan's followers.

And there were those who really were sceptical whether they would follow through, but when the third-ranked of their class put forth his challenge, Qi Long had immediately stepped in to accept on Ling Lan's behalf.

This time, the challenge was again set as an Open Arena battle, drawing the attention of the students of the Central Scout Academy. School hadn't started for long, but the first grade Special Class-A had already requested for an Open Arena battle twice — this gave the upper grade seniors the uniform impression that this year's new students were certainly a violent lot. Of course, this also increased their anticipation for the upcoming mid-year rankings. Would the rankings of the first grade Special Class-A change drastically? If that really happened, it would likely establish a brand new record within the academy. Mind you, in the past, the rankings of Special Class-A had always been pretty much stable and unchanging.

Qi Long and that third-ranked boy had fought bitterly for an hour, the battle dragging on till the very last moment. In the end, Qi Long's will proved to be stronger, and his stamina was better, and he successfully defeated his opponent.

This result made the initially restless students shut up completely. Think about it. Even the third-ranked had lost; if anyone else wanted to challenge, they had better weigh their own capabilities once more before doing so.

Qi Long's reliable performance helped Ling Lan earn several months of peace, which also gave her time to resolve the troublesome issue of her out of control spiritual state. But as the mid-year wide-scale ranking loomed ever closer, the originally calm Ling Lan began to get agitated, because she had still not been able to find a solution to her problem.

When the mid-year ranking tournament arrived, she would no longer be able to refuse the challenges of her peers, unless she chose to give up on her results and leave the Special Class to become a regular class student.

This was a result that Ling Lan could not accept. After knowing what it meant to be in Special Class-A and having experienced all its myriad benefits, Ling Lan wasn't so stupid as to let it go. That's right, Ling Lan really didn't want to stand out too much, but she also didn't want to become a weakling. She still wanted to be in control of her life, and become a truly free person.

"I must solve this problem," said Ling Lan, clenching her fists tight.

Ling Lan knew very well that if she didn't resolve this issue, she would not be able to fight — the Central Scout Academy would never condone the existence of a homicidal maniac. Her loss of control was already at a rather severe stage. Now, whenever she fought, blood would flow like a river, and corpses would litter the ground. She could still clearly remember how she had failed in the most recent mission given by the learning space.

This time, the mission she had received had been to rescue a hostage. However, she ended up killing everyone in the target area, including the hostage she was supposed to save. Consequently, she experienced the learning space's punishment for the first time.

Ling Lan shuddered violently in recollection — that had certainly not been a great experience. The electricity coursing through her body, lingering, as she hovered on the edge of wanting to die yet being unable to die, wanting to live yet unable to live — that suffering was pretty much on par with Number Five's perverse torments. She definitely never wanted to experience it again.

Now Ling Lan finally understood. The so-called learning space was not a helpful cheat code (with the exception of Little Four), but was definitely a malicious glitch that existed to torment her.

While Ling Lan was struggling with anxiety and helplessness, in the learning space, the great Number One who Ling Lan had the utmost respect for was ripping apart Instructor Number Five's personal training space with extreme prejudice.

At that moment, Number Five was busily plotting something inside. When he felt the ground shake and the mountains tremble, he looked at the rapidly disintegrating world around him and knew that the situation was not good. But just as he was about to run, a large hand clamped harshly over his neck.

"Number Five, I merely intended for you to train up Ling Lan's ability to withstand pressure and hardship, not destroy her." Number One steadily glared at Number Five, a deep and seemingly unquenchable anger smouldering within his eyes.

He was someone who put his full trust in his brothers and subordinates — since he had decided to entrust Ling Lan to Number Five for training, he wouldn't interfere in the process. Thus, he hadn't been aware of the abnormality which had developed in Ling Lan's spiritual state.

If Number Nine had not been keeping a close watch on Ling Lan and noticed her strange behaviour in time to notify him, he might have only found out the truth after Ling Lan had thoroughly descended into madness.

Facing Number One's wrath, Number Five was still extremely calm. Helplessly, he said, "Number One, I haven't destroyed her. She's just reached the point where she has to choose a Dao ¹."

Number One's expression changed. "How did this happen so quickly? My initial estimate was that she would only reach this stage four years later."

Recalling something, Number One's expression turned frigid. With mounting anger, he asked, "Number Five, did you break the agreement you made with me and used your Extreme Hell Training Method?"

Number Five laughed, and his eyes were full of satisfaction. With that, Number One understood everything. Overwhelmed with rage, he no longer held back, instantly slamming Number Five violently into the ground.

With a resounding "BAM", Number Five's training space was once again sent

shuddering. Number Five's entire body had been slammed deeply into the ground, and only his face remained exposed aboveground.

This force wasn't easily borne — Number Five's expression was gruesome; the tearing pain didn't allow him to maintain his smile any longer. However, Number Five was unwilling to admit his loss just like that. He forced the corners of his lips to twitch into a smile and said, "Number One, don't blame me. Who asked Ling Lan to be such a great piece of material... originally, I really hadn't thought of using that method, but every time I set an outrageous mission for her, she still managed to ride it out. You just don't know... how every time she completed a mission, I would get that much more excited. Even more unexpectedly, in half a month's time, besides the Extreme Hell Method, she had already worn out my bag of tricks. All my insane training torments had been overcome by her."

Number Five's expression turned a little wild. "That resilience... it's abnormal. I've never encountered anything like it before. And so I became reckless with emotion..."

"So, you broke the rules and let her into your Extreme Hell Training Method for training. You didn't know that doing so would destroy her," said Number One with profound heartache.

Ling Lan was the first person he had truly wanted to cultivate as an inheritor, but unexpectedly, due to his carelessness, she was on the brink of being destroyed by Number Five. He, who had never regretted anything before, actually felt the stirrings of regret in this moment.

"No, I didn't destroy her, Number One. Did you know, she really passed it — the Extreme Hell Training Method — she's the only one who passed it and kept her mind. She has only become caught up in the confusion of Dao." The more Number Five spoke, the more excited he became, and his face was brimming with the fervour of success.

"Passed? You said Ling Lan passed?" Number One couldn't believe it.

"Yes, she passed. The only regret, is that she actually couldn't find her Dao." Number Five's face was filled with regret. In his visualizations, anyone who managed to pass the Extreme Hell Training Method, as long as they came out with their mind intact, would become a strong fighter possessing Dao. But Ling Lan was an oddball — she passed with a clear mind, but was unable to find the Dao that was right for her, and thus descended into chaotic confusion.

"How did this happen?" Number One was also confused now, since he had faith in Number Five's deductions.

"I suspect that it's because she doesn't have a purpose to become strong." Number Five's expression was a little strange. After spending these past few months with Ling Lan, he had gotten a vague sense of how Ling Lan thought. Ling Lan's thoughts were contradictory — she wanted to become a strong person, yet she didn't want to stand out and be burdened with too much responsibility. Even more emphatically, she didn't want to be weak, unable to control her own destiny.

As a result of these contradictions and doubts, although Ling Lan's spiritual power had already arrived at the doorstep of Dao, its weight was not substantial enough to push open the door to enter a more profound realm. For context, it should be known that once a person grasped the power of Dao, all aspects of their abilities would improve on a vertical axis. In future, regardless of what they wanted to do or learn, their progress would certainly cover a thousand miles in one day² — things that would have taken them ten years to learn before, would very likely take them only two to three years to master.

"What Dao do you think she's most likely to enter?" Number One's expression was grim as he asked this. Number Five was the most familiar with Ling Lan's condition — Number One needed to understand more, so he could figure out how to help Ling Lan choose the right Dao.

"Killing Dao! A while back, she failed a hostage rescue mission. The reason being that she killed everyone at the camp site, including the hostage," said Number Five with a smile. If they left Ling Lan unchecked, then with the passing of time, it was almost a certainty that Ling Lan would enter the Killing Dao.

"Unacceptable. The Killing Dao is too bloody, incompatible with Ling Lan's personality." Number One rejected this Dao immediately. Frankly, the Killing Dao was also an extremely good Dao, except that anyone who walked this Dao must be able to become truly cold and emotionless, so it was unsuitable for Ling Lan.

Ling Lan may look cold and aloof on the surface, but inside, she was actually a person who cared deeply. This was why she was willing to pretend to be a boy for Lan Luofeng's sake, and go through all the accompanying troubles. It was also the reason why when Qi Long and the others had stuck to her and insisted on calling her Boss, she had decided to just give in. It was why even when she knew Lin Zhong-qing was

just using her, Ling Lan had still chosen to help him out.

"The Demonic Dao is also a possibility," choked out Number Five amidst laughter. He actually knew well that Ling Lan was very against the Killing Dao, so it was highly probable that her heart would become troubled and conflicted, resulting in an internal demon. If the internal demon managed to fully develop, Ling Lan would have no other choice than to walk the Demonic Dao in the end.

Number One threw a cold glare at Number Five, causing his exposed head aboveground to break out in a cold sweat. He received Number One's meaning loud and clear. It was obvious that Number One hated his recklessness, which had resulted in this internal demon forming within Ling Lan, which may force her onto a path that Number One found distasteful.

According to Number One's original plans, four years later, Ling Lan would very naturally enter the gates of Dao. Then, she would have been able to smoothly transition into the problem-free Sovereign Dao or perhaps the Sage Dao. This was the Dao that Number One had intended for Ling Lan, for it was the broadest and most straightforward of Daos.

Unfortunately, Number Five had interfered. Although he had managed to push Ling Lan to the gateway of Dao within a terrifyingly short time, because Ling Lan's spirit wasn't ready yet, she was now plagued with a host of problems.

"Looks like, Ling Lan needs to find her personal reason for becoming strong as soon as possible. But, who can help her?" Number One sighed. He wasn't good at handling this sort of psychological issues.

"I'll go." A clear voice rang out from behind Number One.

Number Nine appeared, her sweet face filled with killing intent, and the gaze she directed at Number Five was almost heavy enough to kill. Number Five raised his head to look up at the sky, pretending that he didn't see anything. Right now, he simply didn't dare to annoy Number Nine who was in full protective tiger-mum mode.

Number One's expression eased and he said, "Alright. Number Nine, I'll leave Ling Lan to you."

Number Nine nodded and quickly disappeared.

Only then did Number Five smile bitterly and look back. "Finally, she's gone. Number One, can you let me out now?"

Number One stared at him coldly, and then stomped firmly right on top of his head, sending him straight into the ground so he was truly buried alive. Then, Number One immediately disappeared from Number Five's training space.

Not too long after, Number Five miraculously resurfaced from within the earth,. His expression was at ease as he said cheerfully, "So not just Number Nine has developed feelings, even Number One is affected, becoming more and more human. The experiment this time was very successful. Ling Lan truly possesses the ability to influence intelligent bio-entities... the only thing left, is whether this ability is beneficial or harmful to us intelligent bio-entities?"

"Still, it's really dangerous for Ling Lan this time... did I really go overboard? If something really happens to Ling Lan, then wouldn't I lose a lot of entertainment? There's no other material with such resilience, capable of withstanding every single one of my newly developed training methods. Hm, yes, looks like I'll have to think of a way to help her overcome this crisis..." Number Five was deep in thought — at this moment, he was completely unaware that he, who had never cared for whether a material lived or died, was actually worrying over Ling Lan.

Chapter 74

Little Four's Suggestion

Ling Lan had just lain down, when she felt her consciousness being forcefully dragged once more into the learning space. However, Ling Lan was now used to this — after all, the instructors in the learning space all just loved to contact her this way.

This time, what she saw first wasn't the cold face of Number One, nor was it the twisted smile of Number Five — instead, it was the delicate features of Number Nine. Seeing Number Nine's lovely face, Ling Lan felt as if she was healed instantly.

"Instructor Number Nine!" Overcome with emotion, Ling Lan pounced. She really hadn't seen Instructor Number Nine in so long. She had really missed her, but it wasn't up to her whether or not she could see a particular instructor — the learning space was the one who decided.

Hugging Instructor Number Nine tightly, she could feel the generous swell of the other's bosom under her military uniform. Oh, the envy, jealousy, and hate that stirred within her! Heaven knows if she would be able to have such a voluptuous body like Instructor Number Nine's when she grew up?

Then, Ling Lan recalled her current identity as a fake man, and was instantly thrust into gloom. She had overheard her mother saying before that, once she hit puberty, she would need to be injected with blockers to prevent her body from secreting too much oestrogen... In other words, if she could not reclaim her female status, then she would be destined to be just like how she was in her past life — flat as an airport runway ¹.

Number Nine looked at the emotional Ling Lan, and her heart was filled with fluffy feelings. It truly had been a while since she last saw Ling Lan, and she had missed her just as much. However, Number Nine was still Number Nine in the end. Her emotions were only visible for that short moment before she regained her usual cool and aloof appearance.

She patted Ling Lan's shoulder before letting go, and then asked calmly, "Ling Lan, is something wrong with your spiritual self?"

At this question, Ling Lan bowed her head dejectedly. "Instructor Number Nine, so even you've found out about it."

"Yes. Strange fluctuations appearing in your spiritual self... as an inhabitant of your mind, of course I can sense it." Number Nine explained why all the instructors knew. Of course, what Number Nine didn't say, was that this was actually only possible if an inhabitant broke the rules, forcefully breaking boundaries to sense the host's condition. For that, Number Nine had had to pay a hefty price.

This was the learning space's restriction upon the inhabitants, as well as protection for the host. If Number Nine wasn't so concerned that Number Five would break Ling Lan, she wouldn't have committed this violation.

Seeing Ling Lan in such low spirits, Number Nine was anxious. Not one to beat around the bush to begin with, she went straight to the point and asked, "Do you know why this situation is happening?"

Ling Lan thought about it for a moment, and then replied uncertainly, "Is it because Instructor Number Five's training has created some negative emotions? Which then influenced my emotional balance?"

"No, that's not it," Number Nine denied firmly.

Seeing Number Nine reject the reason she had thought was behind all this, Ling Lan was even more confused. "If that's not it, then what is it?"

"It's your heart. It's filled with doubt and uncertainty." Number Nine announced the answer directly.

"Huh?" Ling Lan hadn't expected this answer. Could doubt and uncertainty cause her spirit to twist so much that she would lose control? Ling Lan's first instinct was disbelief, that Number Nine was just joking with her.

But seeing Number Nine's steady gaze, Ling Lan could not be sure.

"Ling Lan, although I do not know why your tolerance is so extraordinary, almost aberrant, it is why you were able to withstand all the tests and torments set for you by Number Five. This has made your spiritual power grow very strong, very rapidly, to the point that you've even touched upon the gates of Dao."

"Dao?" Ling Lan was even more bewildered. She was currently in a technologically advanced future world, not an ignorant medieval period when cultivation theory discussions were popular.

"Er... you don't need to understand this right now. What I want to tell you, is that this abnormality in your spirit is occurring because you do not have a clear purpose in your heart for becoming stronger." Number Nine knew she had slipped up, so she hurriedly tried to gloss over it.

"Purpose?" By this time, Ling Lan's eyes were wide and round, dazed. Number Nine had thoroughly confused her, and her mind was spinning.

"Yes, you've accepted all the missions and training we've set for you, and endured them despite all the difficulty. Why?"

Ling Lan held her dizzy head in her hands as she desperately searched for an answer to the question.

But Number Nine stopped her. "Don't be in a rush to answer — go back and think about it carefully. Think about what kind of future is it that you want, and what your reason is for wanting to grow stronger... Once you've figured this out, the spiritual problem bothering you now will go away and you'll return to normal."

With that said, Number Nine chased Ling Lan out of her training space.

Just like that, Ling Lan came to the central hall of the learning space. At this time, Little Four was crouched in the centre of the hall, drawing something on the ground with his butt stuck up in the air; completely oblivious to Ling Lan's arrival.

Ling Lan calmed herself a little, and started to reflect on Instructor Number Nine's words. Number Nine had undoubtedly given her some good news, which was that the loss of control of her spiritual power she was so worried about was not a huge problem. It could be healed naturally, as long as she could find the answer to dispel the doubt and uncertainty from her heart.

But, what were her doubts and uncertainties? Ling Lan was lost once again.

Little Four, having finally completed his masterpiece, stood up, and was prepared to

admire it for a good while when, with a subconscious lift of his head, he saw Ling Lan standing right before him.

With a thump, Little Four fell over, and his first reaction was to wonder if his tricks had been noticed by Ling Lan.

This noise startled Ling Lan, who raised her head to see Little Four sitting on the ground with a frightened look on his face. She couldn't help but frown and ask, "Little Four, what's going on?"

Little Four hurriedly put on a fawning face and said sweetly, "Boss, why are you here?" With a pull of his right hand, a floor cushion appeared in his hand out of thin air. He carefully set down the cushion by his side and said submissively, "Boss, are you tired? Come sit here."

At the same time, behind him where Ling Lan couldn't see, Little Four swiped his left hand and the picture on the ground before him was wiped clean, leaving no trace behind.

Ling Lan's thoughts hadn't been on Little Four to begin with, preoccupied with her own internal dilemma. Hearing Little Four's reply, she didn't pry any further, but instead sat down with a long face by Little Four's side, sighing deeply.

Knowing that he hadn't been found out, Little Four was instantly at ease. It was his duty as Ling Lan's number one follower to help his boss solve her problems, so seeing Ling Lan so troubled, he quickly opened his mouth to ask, "Boss, why are you sighing? Tell me about it. Maybe Little Four can help."

"Instructor Number Nine said that my heart has doubts and uncertainties, and that I don't have a resolute will or purpose for becoming stronger." Of course, Ling Lan didn't really expect Little Four to be able to help her, but it was still nice to share one's troubles, so she spilled her worries to Little Four anyway.

Little Four was very surprised, for he didn't think of that as a great problem at all. "Boss! What's there to worry about? If you don't have a purpose, you just need to find one!"

"Does it work that way?" Ling Lan was nonplussed. Could it be that she was overthinking it?

Chapter 75

The Dream of Having Kids!

"Why wouldn't it? If you don't have a purpose, then let's just build one. Once you have a purpose, Boss, then you won't be doubtful and uncertain anymore." The more Little Four spoke, the smuggler he became, and then he abruptly realised that he truly was, as expected, one of the smartest of the intelligent bio-entities.

It made sense! Ling Lan decided to try out Little Four's method, even though Little Four really did seem rather flaky... Perhaps she would be able to luck out, like a blind cat stumbling over a dead rat, and stumble across the solution.

Ling Lan contemplated for a long while, and then, with a face full of confusion, she asked, "Little Four, what purpose should I build exactly?"

Little Four was speechless. Wasn't this something the Boss should decide for herself? Why was she asking him?

Still, Little Four was undoubtedly a dutiful follower. Without a word of complaint, he immediately browsed through his database, and word after highlighted word started popping out at him. Excitedly, Little Four said, "Boss, let's go dominate the galaxies!"

Ling Lan rolled her eyes dramatically at Little Four. "Do you take me for an idiot?" Anyone who would do something so troublesome — putting in so much mental and physical effort for no praise to boot — must be an idiot.

"Then... how about becoming a king somewhere?" Little Four lowered his ambition by a large margin.

"Not interested," said Ling Lan huffily. Couldn't Little Four give any more *normal* suggestions? She was definitely not the type of person who wanted to become a ruler — Ling Lan knew herself well enough to know that.

"Building a harmonious and perfect world?" ... "Becoming a peerless hero?" ...

Ling Lan was peeved. Suggesting all these grand ambitions, Little Four was obviously

just mocking her. Dammit, she wasn't a saint!

Under Ling Lan's increasingly displeased gaze, Little Four's voice became softer and softer... Boo hoo hoo! Boss, these are all search results from the database — even if Ling Lan wasn't happy about it, there was nothing he could do.

Oh? There was one more. Little Four suddenly noticed one unread result. "Right, we could start a harem and sow seeds?" Although he didn't have a clue as to what 'start a harem and sow seeds' meant, this phrase appeared at a rate no less than the previous suggestions.

Hearing this, Ling Lan flew into a rage, immediately hammering a fist onto Little Four's head. "Idiot, I'm a girl!" Dammit, 'sowing seeds' was something men did, alright? Besides, she didn't have a female-queen mentality. Plus, she had been raised with the concept of 'one husband one wife' — as such, this was something that she simply could not accept.

"So a girl can't sow seeds in a harem?" Little Four pouted, a little unconvinced. He really didn't understand what this had to do with gender. However, since Boss clearly hated this one, of course it would be discarded without question.

The two of them continued to puzzle over the issue, seated together with their faces resting within the cups of their hands, frowning heavily.

Ten minutes passed... Half an hour passed... and finally, an hour passed... Still unable to think of any good suggestions, Little Four was driven mad. Pulling at his own hair, he screamed, "Aaaah... I really can't think of anything! What other great purposes are there?!"

"Great? Why does it have to be great?" Ling Lan seemed to have been triggered by Little Four and found a new avenue of thought. "Perhaps we could start thinking from small wishes..."

Little Four did not understand. "What do you mean?"

"For example, Little Four, what is the goal you want to fulfil most right now?"

Hearing this, Little Four puffed out his little chest and said, "I want to be Boss's number one follower."

Ling Lan's was speechless. Didn't he have any slightly more ambitious thoughts? Besides, she had already declared him her number one follower — why was he still so caught up in this issue?

Little Four seemed to have gotten the point though. He looked at Ling Lan with shining eyes and said, "Boss, what do *you* want to accomplish at the moment?"

"Continue maintaining my position in Special Class-A." Ling Lan's response was quick and without hesitation. This was truly what had been bothering her most recently.

"Maintain? Don't you want to be first?" Little Four was puzzled. With Ling Lan's strength, getting first place should be a piece of cake.

"No plans for that. Of course, if I get it by accident then that's fine too. I'm just going to go with the flow." Ling Lan wasn't too bothered by this issue.

The moment she finished speaking, Ling Lan jolted. Could it be that the aimlessness and hesitation that Instructor Number Nine had mentioned was precisely this lackadaisical attitude of hers? Because she had always gone with the flow, accepting everything life gave her — be it her grades, her training, or even the training missions in the learning space. Honestly, she had never pursued any of it on her own initiative.

"I've figured it out..." Ling Lan felt enlightened.

"Could it be that I really should go after the first place ranking?" Although Ling Lan felt that she was onto something here, her heart was still a little troubled. Deep inside, she didn't really want to make waves and push herself into the spotlight — would forcing herself to do something she didn't want to do really resolve her current plight? Or would she just end up going further down the wrong path?

"If you don't feel like it then leave it. After all, even if you get first place, there aren't that many benefits to it. The cost and benefits just don't match up." Little Four wasn't plagued by all those chaotic thoughts running through Ling Lan's mind; he was only looking for the answer purely from a cost-benefit standpoint. Obtaining first place — there was pretty much no benefit other than an increase in reputation, so Little Four was unconcerned about whether his boss became the first rank.

"Boss, you need to find something more profitable to do." Out of boredom, Little Four conjured a lollipop in his hand and licked it a couple of times. He believed that anything could be done, just not pointless work.

"More profitable? There really isn't anything." Ling Lan, who was all tapped out of desires, really couldn't think of anything that fit Little Four's criteria.

Little Four was stumped. He gave a hard lick to his lollipop, and then very seriously said to Ling Lan, "Let's put it this way. Boss, what kind of life do you want to have in the future?"

"A peaceful, free one. And when I'm bored, I can give birth to a child, raise him, and play with him." A smile played on Ling Lan's lips. She really wanted a child of her own. If her two lives were added together, she really wasn't that young anymore.

When Little Four heard what Ling Lan had to say, his expression turned miserable.

Seeing Little Four's exaggerated expression, Ling Lan was irked. "What? I can't have a child?"

"Of course you can," Little Four hastily reassured her. "But Boss, have you not thought about your situation?"

"Situation? About my identity as a fake man?" Ling Lan was abruptly brought back to reality. With this identity, it was basically fated that she wouldn't be able to wed someone openly. If she wanted to borrow sperm from some man, she'd even have to do it secretly...

"I believe the Ling family will arrange for a loyalist to couple with me." Ling Lan wasn't worried that she wouldn't get a man, for Lan Luofeng and Ling Qin would never let the Ling family line die out.

"Won't work," objected Little Four, agitated.

"Huh? Why?" Ling Lan didn't understand.

"Boss, you must know, whether a child is excellent or not is basically all up to the genes of the father ¹." Within this period of time, Little Four had been doing a lot of research on this topic on the virtual network.

"Ah... so this means that no matter how great my genes are, it's useless?" Ling Lan was incensed. She would be the one giving birth to the child, but whether or not the child was excellent had nothing to do with her? That was just preposterous!

Regretfully, Little Four said, "Of course if the mother's genetics are better, the child will be even more outstanding, but the main load is still on the father. If the father's genetics are weak, the child's birth stats are almost guaranteed to be weaker."

"In other words, if I want my baby to be more outstanding, I cannot just find some random man." Ling Lan gnashed her teeth. What kind of heredity is this? Why make the father's side so important?

With schadenfreude ², Little Four said, "That's right, Boss."

"With my current circumstances, it's impossible to freely date a strong man, get married and have kids." Ling Lan finally understood the meaning behind Little Four's exaggerated expression.

Of course, if Ling Lan didn't care for the stats of the baby, then all this wouldn't be a problem. However, Ling Lan was definitely a responsible mother. If she could let her baby be more outstanding, she would definitely not let her own baby take the lesser option.

"Is there really no way to resolve this?" asked Ling Lan with a frown. She didn't believe that. No matter what, she would have a baby. No matter how difficult the process was, she would still accomplish it — this was all she wanted to do in this life.

"There is. Two ways." Little Four was as reliable as ever, directly coming up with two options for Ling Lan.

"Number one, rob the Federation's sperm bank. I believe there will be lots of strong men's sperm kept there." Little Four's words made Ling Lan's eyes light up, but his next words made Ling Lan's face fall.

"However, you'll need to defeat the ace mecha squad stationed there. Rumour has it that the leader is an imperial operator. As a reminder, an imperial operator is just one level below a god-class operator — for you to successfully steal the sperm from the bank, you'll need to have the capability close to that of a god-class operator, otherwise, you'll be going in alive and coming out dead."

"And the other way?" Ling Lan decisively discarded this option. She only wanted to have a kid, not seek death.

"Find a random strong man you like, push him down, and just have your way with

him," said Little Four savagely.

Ling Lan wanted to face-palm. Dammit, these two methods were just not something a normal person could do.

"I recommend you pick the second option. Going up against one strong man will definitely be easier than going up against a team of strong men," suggested Little Four considerably.

Little Four's words didn't make Ling Lan's expression turn any better, because raping a strong man was definitely not an easy thing.

"Of course, you could also try seduction... if a strong man is willing to take a romp under the sheets with you, Boss, then you wouldn't have to worry anymore." Little Four smiled in satisfaction, thinking that this suggestion of his was just amazing.

"Idiot!" Ling Lan knocked Little Four's head exasperatedly. Which man would willingly romp under the sheets with another man? Unless he was bent. But if he was bent then *she* wouldn't be able to take it, because ultimately, she was still female.

"No? Then Boss, you'll just have to do it forcefully," said Little Four regretfully.

"Forcefully, eh? Looks like I'll have to become even stronger or else I won't be able to overpower the other." Ling Lan racked her brains and found that what Little Four said made sense. For the sake of giving birth to an outstanding baby, she just had to break past her limits.

"Yup. Good luck, Boss. You'll need to work harder from now on, or else you won't be able to raise an outstanding child." Little Four gave Ling Lan his encouragement.

Suddenly, Ling Lan found that all her suffering at the learning space's hands was not meaningless — it would make her stronger, making it easier for her to achieve her goals.

"A child birthed by me, Ling Lan, must be the most excellent one..." Ling Lan's eyes no longer held any trace of doubt or uncertainty. No one would be able to stop her from carrying out her resolution to give birth to an exceptional child. "In that case, I must become the strongest so that I will have a greater range of selection..."

Because of this simple wish, Ling Lan stepped onto the path of the strong, no longer

lost.

Chapter 76

The Ranking Tournament Begins

It wasn't long before the mid-year wide-scale rankings were finally here, and the theoretical exams for various subjects were the first to be held. Ling Lan was very confident regarding these exams. She always had a great memory and now she also had the ultimate cheating machine, Little Four, so it was almost impossible for her not to get full marks.

However, Ling Lan soon found that she had celebrated too soon. Any child who could enter Special Class-A was no simpleton — their IQs were all terrifyingly high, as proven by the publicized scores on the digital bulletin board. Almost all the Class-A students scored full marks, with the exception of a few kids who lost one or two marks out of carelessness.

Alright, so only two students didn't get full marks, and one of them was Qi Long. Furthermore, he was the one who had the most marks deducted, one mark each for two subjects, tragically putting him in the last place of Special Class-A, which Qi Long felt was a great loss of face.

There was no helping it. His brash and forthright personality made it impossible for him to be as detail-oriented as Han Jijyun and Luo Lang — lacking the patience to check his work, he could only lose marks. Luckily for him, he only made minor errors in two subjects; based on Han Jijyun's pre-exam prediction, Qi Long would have at least lost marks in three to four subjects.

Meanwhile, the other student had only been deducted one mark. But that one mark was enough to drop him below rank 100, for among the children of the other classes, there were more than a few who scored full marks as well.

Of course, Qi Long, who had been deducted two marks, was no longer even within the top two hundred. One could clearly see just how intense the competition was within the academy.

Of course, the current rankings were only temporary — the final rankings were still pending on the combat results, for that was where the real test was. The Central Scout

Academy placed the highest priority on combat arts. As long as you defeated everyone, even if your theory grades were average, you would still be the uncontested number one of the Central Scout Academy.

Of course, the theory grades were not unimportant, for the combat exams were held under an elimination system. The children who were eliminated would be given their final rank based on their theory results. Only if two eliminated students happened to have the same theory results, then the two of them would have to go through an additional combat match to determine their final rank.

For example, when the top 8 progressed into the top 4, four students would be eliminated. Based on their theory grades, the one with the highest score would automatically be ranked 5th, and so on and so forth. In the situation where same scores appear, like say the 5th and 6th place had the same theory marks, then the 5th and 6th would have an additional fight to determine the actual 5th and 6th places. If this happened with the 7th and 8th, it would be the same thing, where the 7th and 8th would battle to confirm the 7th and 8th ranks. If the 6th and the 7th had the same theory grades, then the 5th rank and the 8th rank would be confirmed first, and then the 6th and 7th would battle each other to determine the true 6th and 7th ranks...

Therefore, the theory results were not very important for the winners but were crucial for those who failed. At times, the difference of just one theory mark could spell the difference between heaven and earth.

And so, the much anticipated ranking tournament officially began within the combat hall of the Central Scout Academy.

Because this was the combat ranking battles held every six months, all the arenas in the combat hall were opened. The options for closed battles were removed so all the battles could be displayed openly for public viewing. The students could choose to spectate in person or watch a live broadcast of the all the arena ranking battles from their dorms.

The ranking battles were fought on an elimination system — the ten grades of the scout academy were split across approximately three thousand arenas. On the first day, those participating in the ranking battles were just the regular class students. The winners would then move on to the second day to battle the merit class students. On

the third day, the Special Class-B students would officially join in, while Special Class-A would only take part on the fourth day.

These few days, Ling Lan had just stayed put in her own villa. She told the others that she was meditating to centre herself, but in truth, she was actually entering the learning space and making full use of the time she had left to resolve the problem of her loss of spiritual control.

Ever since she had confirmed her desire to have an excellent kid as her purpose for becoming strong, when Ling Lan had once again accepted a bloody mission from the learning space, she actually found that she would no longer lose herself like before when she entered combat mode. She could retain a little of her awareness now — though this duration was short, it was still undoubtedly a good sign, giving Ling Lan hope that she would be able to regain full control of herself.

Ling Lan was glad that she had the learning space. The ranking battle was almost here so there wasn't much time left in reality, but her time could be considerably extended within the learning space. Without any hesitation, Ling Lan had taken the initiative to ask Instructor Number Five to extend the time within the learning space to the maximum so that she would have sufficient time to resolve her problem.

She knew that this decision would also extend her time of suffering under Instructor Number Five's hands, but in order to accomplish her objectives, Ling Lan no longer feared anything.

Number Five was extremely receptive to Ling Lan's request for further self-torture and had agreed without question. After three years time (time which had been prolonged by the learning space) of bitter suffering, Ling Lan regained her sobriety bit by bit. Finally, she succeeded in mastering her self-control within the time limit. Moreover, due to the additional torments she had endured within this period of time, her heart had become unbelievably strong, and her spiritual power had become extremely solid.

Ling Lan believed that, even if the world were to be destroyed before her eyes now, she would be able to face it with a calm face and a steady heart, as serene as ever.

While she had succeeded in mastering her mind, Ling Lan had also discovered that she now had a new understanding of the combat arts she had previously learned...

Early on the fourth day, Ling Lan, who had perfectly resolved her control problems, left her residence.

She had just arrived at the hover car stop when she saw Qi Long and the other two boys waiting for her a little further ahead.

When Han Jijyun saw Ling Lang arrive, he used the sensor to call for a hover car to bring the four of them to the colossal combat hall.

Right now, the combat hall was not as crowded as it had been in the last three days. After all, only 200 combatants were left for each grade, so the total of all ten grades only made up 2000 people. Adding on the friends and classmates who were here to spectate, there was still only 5000 to 6000 people. Compared to the first day when there were 70 to 80 thousand people rubbing shoulders, this was nothing.

"Qi Long, here, here!" A strident voice rang out from a corner of the combat hall. Ling Lan looked over and saw that it was the two girls, Han Xuya and Luo Chao, and beside them were some of the other original group 072 members.

Luo Lang was very excited and was the first to rush over while Qi Long, who had been called for directly, naturally went together with Luo Lang. Ling Lan and Han Jijyun shared a smile, and then slowly walked over as well.

The female dormitory where Han Xuya and Luo Chao were staying was on the opposite end of Qi Long and the other three's dorm, so it wasn't very convenient for them to meet up anywhere else but here in the combat hall.

"You all came too." Ling Lan nodded in greeting to the others.

"Yup, we've all been lucky enough to squeeze into the top 200." Li Jinghong was the one who spoke up. As a member of the merit class, he was thrilled to make it into the top 200. It should be known that there were 2000 students in the merit classes. Anyone who could enter the top 200 was undeniably outstanding, for among these top 200, the 50 Special Class-A students were also included.

"Good luck. As long as you win one fight, you might have a chance to enter the special classes," Qi Long cheerfully encouraged Li Jinghong as he patted his shoulders. The top 100 were the special class students, with the only difference being whether one

was in Class-A or Class-B.

If Li Jinghong really managed to win his upcoming battle, he would definitely be considered a successful contender and would probably become the centre of attention for a long while.

Li Jinghong was a little embarrassed. "I don't dare to think that far. Everyone here is strong — I can only say that in the earlier fights, I was a bit luckier. The opponents I faced were all not very strong."

Hearing this, He Chaoyang, who was also in the merit classes with Li Jinghong, was a little displeased. "Jinghong, it doesn't matter if we can do it or not, but we shouldn't lose our spirits. Since we've already made it here, we should fight our best."

Li Jinghong was enlightened, and nodded energetically, "Chaoyang, you're right. Since we're already in the top 200, if we don't try our best then it wouldn't be fair to our previous efforts."

"That's how it should be." He Chaoyang smiled. The two of them were the only two of the 072 group to enter the merit classes. Being in the same environment had made them become very close — they'd helped each other, supporting one another as they progressed together.

Seeing this, Luo Shaoyun said worriedly, "Ah, Li Jinghong and He Chaoyang are working so hard... looks like our positions aren't safe."

Luo Shaoyun's words caused Han Xuya and Luo Chao to become worried in turn.

"You're still alright, but it'll be difficult to say for little Luo Chao and me." Han Xuya sighed heavily. She found that the pressure from entering Special Class-B was much higher than that of entering the merit classes. This time, she had only narrowly made it into the top 200 — if the opponent hadn't fallen over before she had from a lack of stamina, she might already have lost in the battle moving from 400 to 200. Heaven knows if she would be able to continue on this time... if she couldn't make it into the top 100, she would drop into the merit classes.

Staring at her own fingers, Luo Chao timidly said, "I... I'm also very worried."

Her expression rendered Luo Lang speechless — unfortunately, he couldn't fight on behalf of his sister, otherwise he would definitely not let Luo Chao be so worried.

"At this stage, it's no longer a matter of just strength, but more of spirit." Seeing the misgivings on the two girls' faces, Ling Lan, who was also a girl at heart, couldn't help but speak up.

"How so?" Apart from Qi Long, Luo Lang, and Han Jijyun, the other children all looked at Ling Lan with expectant faces, hoping that Ling Lan would enlighten them.

"The strength of those who managed to enter the top 200 is actually roughly the same, so it's possible for either side to win. In the end, victory will depend on whose confidence is stronger, and whose endurance is greater, that's all." Ling Lan kept her arms folded behind her back, and secretly crossed her fingers. Her intent was just to encourage them; she wouldn't take any responsibility for anything beyond that...

Han Xuya's gaze brightened. "Just like my previous match! I just have to hold on for a second longer than my opponent, and victory will be mine."

Ling Lan nodded, indicating that what Han Xuya said was right.

Luo Chao looked at Ling Lan, blushing, and thought to herself: *"Ling Lan definitely must not like girls who give up easily. Yes, I must work hard, I must hold on until the end..."*

Ling Lan settled everyone's nervous jitters with a few words, and their eyes all began to shine with confidence. Han Jijyun stared keenly at Ling Lan. He hadn't expected Ling Lan to be so astoundingly proficient at handling the hearts of people as well — where the hell did he come from really? An elite family? Some unknown formidable force? Or perhaps...

Han Jijyun didn't dare to probe too deeply. He took a deep breath and pushed aside all the stray thoughts in his mind. He warned himself — Ling Lan was just Ling Lan, their Boss Lan. All he needed to do was remember this.

Chapter 77

The Debut of Techniques and Secret Skills!

Frankly, Han Jijyun was overthinking things; clever people were very likely to make this mistake. Ling Lan's words were all just plain reassurances; there was nothing more to it. As for why they worked so well — all we can say is that Ling Lan was just too highly regarded within group 072, so everyone believed her without question.

Their small group walked to the area set aside for the first-grade ranking battles. Along the way, Qi Long subtly tugged on Ling Lan's arm and Ling Lan reflexively slowed her steps.

Seeing that the other companions beside them weren't paying any attention to them, Qi Long whispered quietly, "Boss Lan, has your problem been solved?"

The other companions may not have known about Ling Lan's problem, but as an unintended victim, Qi Long knew very well that when Ling Lan put his full attention into battle, he had issues with losing control.

Ling Lan's heart felt warm as she nodded at Qi Long, saying, "Don't worry, I'm fine now."

Qi Long smiled in visible relief. "That's great." Suddenly, his expression turned serious and he said, "Boss Lan, this time, I will fight with my full strength." When he said this, Qi Long's eyes were full of fighting spirit — it was clear that he really wanted to defeat Ling Lan just once.

Ling Lan nodded, accepting the challenge.

Right then, the two of them felt the communicators on their wrists vibrate powerfully. Their eyes lit up — the notification of their battles had arrived.

Sure enough, the communicators displayed their fighting grounds and match order. Qi Long's fight was at arena 33, the third match, while Ling Lan's was at arena 35, the sixth match.

"Boss Lan, this time, my fight will end before yours." Qi Long was very excited. This way, he wouldn't miss out on watching Ling Lan's fight.

Their other companions had also received their respective notifications. Several of them were browsing through their notifications when Han Xuya abruptly yelled, "Ah ah ah, why is my battle the first match?! Ah, I'm not mentally prepared yet!"

Luo Chao hurriedly consoled her, saying, "Mine's not much better, I'm fighting second."

"Me too!"

"Me too!"

Luo Shaoyun and Li Jinghong yelled out at the same time. The three of them anxiously stuck out their arms, lining up their communicators in a row so they could compare their fight arenas. When they found that they weren't assigned to the same arena, the three of them let out a breath of relief. Luo Chao in particular was patting her chest lightly, trying to calm her pounding heart. Everyone's luck was pretty decent; they didn't have to fight amongst themselves from the start.

None of them wished to fight one of their own companions and send the other out.

Both Qi Long and Yuan Youyun were up for the third match, but just like the others for the second match, they were at different arenas. Han Jijun and He Chaoyang were up for the fourth match, again at different arenas, causing all of them to sigh in relief.

Luo Lang was up for the fifth match, while Ling Lan was up for the sixth. Although they didn't know if there was a seventh match or more after that, this was the best arrangement possible for Ling Lan's group. The knowledge that the strongest Ling Lan was going up last, was an intangible source of inspiration and mental support for them.

The first up was Han Xuya. The first match was at arena 32 and she was up against a chubster from the merit classes.

The fights arranged by the academy were never dictated by luck — the students from the special classes would be fighting against those students from the merit and regular classes who had battled their way up, so if those students wanted to rise up beyond their station, they would have to defeat a special class student fair and square.

The two chubby kids standing together on the arena stage made for a humorous picture. Han Xuya, in particular, had a strange quirk — she liked to chew on jerky during battle, so her chubby cheeks were forever bulging, just like an eating hamster.

Of course, only Ling Lan felt this way. The other companions were all watching arena 32 anxiously, waiting for Han Xuya's battle results. They became superstitious at this time, hoping that Han Xuya could bring back the first win and bring them all luck.

Han Xuya didn't let them down; the chubster across her didn't give Han Xuya too much trouble. Not long after the fight began, Han Xuya caught onto one of the opponent's careless mistakes and threw him to the ground. Before the other could climb back up, Han Xuya barrelled right at him like a mini torpedo.

A heavy "BAM!" of impact made Ling Lan and the others observing gasp in sympathetic fright, teeth aching. Sure enough, the little chubster was utterly stunned by Han Xuya's heavyweight blow, allowing Han Xuya to sit on him without much resistance, wherefore she began pummeling him left and right.

The teacher refereeing the match couldn't help but break out into a cold sweat. He hurriedly called an end to the match and declared Han Xuya the winner. He was afraid that the little chubster would end up dying if he yelled any slower.

Smugly, Han Xuya walked off the stage. Qi Long asked Han Jijyun beside him, "Have you all learned a new move?" Han Xuya's teeth-aching method of barrelling into someone was something she couldn't do before.

Han Jijyun nodded and said, "Yes. For this ranking battle, the elders in the family specially arranged some special training and taught us a few tricks we could use right now."

Qi Long's expression grew grim. Most likely, any student with hereditary family martial arts would have had special training in preparation for the ranking battles. This competition wasn't as simple as he thought it would be.

When Luo Chao went up next, this point was proven. Luo Lang and Luo Chao hadn't wasted any of their prep time either. Luo Chao's physical strength was obviously weaker than Han Xuya's. This time, Luo Chao fought in a very smart manner — she didn't engage the opponent directly like Han Xuya, but danced around the opponent, saving her strength as much as possible as she looked for the opponent's weak points.

Luo Chao's opponent was also a member of the merit classes, who had solid basics — even though his every move and stance was nothing special, they also had no obvious weaknesses.

"Your sister may be in trouble," Qi Long commented worriedly. Although he and Luo Lang didn't really get along, he was still rather protective of the bashful Luo Chao. Seeing the fight entering a stalemate, he couldn't help but say something.

Luo Lang's hands had already clenched into fists by his thighs. He was the one who was the most worried for his sister, but he still remained calm as he said, "Don't rush, just wait a little longer... as long as she can find a weak point, Luo Chao will definitely be able to defeat the opponent." Luo Lang had seen Luo Chao's hard work all this time; he hoped Luo Chao's efforts wouldn't go to waste here.

This match was the longest of all the first-grade matches — Luo Chao's match was still unfinished by the time Luo Shaoyun and Li Jinghong returned. And at this moment, Qi Long and Yuan Youyun had already received the notification to get ready, for their matches were about to start.

Qi Long and Yuan Youyun hadn't left for long when Luo Chao's movement speed slowed noticeably, and Luo Lang's expression changed dramatically.

At the same time, Luo Chao's opponent was startled for a moment, but then his eyes gleamed with joy. He quickly sped forwards and thrust a fist directly at Luo Chao's chest.

Although Luo Chao had quick reflexes, turning her body to evade, her left shoulder was still hit, and a trace of pain appeared on her young face. However, her left hand didn't slow down at all, grabbing hold of the opponent's right arm which had struck her.

"Not good!" The opponent felt his right arm being grabbed and knew that he was in trouble. As expected, Luo Chao's right fist came right at him but he had no way to dodge. Who'd have expected that such a delicate-looking girl would have the courage to exchange a fist for a fist — this was thoroughly a lose-lose situation where both sides would be injured.

"Oh no! They're both hurt! Is Little Sister Luo Chao alright?" Seeing this scene, the newly returned Luo Shaoyun and Li Jinghong couldn't help but exclaim in shock —

they really liked this pretty sister of Luo Lang's.

Luo Lang said nothing in response but looked at the scene with a cold expression. Equally injured? Not necessarily!

Luo Chao's opponent naturally didn't want to just take Luo Chao's punch without resisting — he brought up his left arm in a horizontal block in front of his chest and readied himself to take Luo Chao's attack. In his opinion, girls were naturally weaker so his left arm should be enough to parry the attack and diffuse the power behind it.

However, when Luo Chao's fist met his shoulder, he felt a great surge of energy crashing onto it and then a snapping sound could be heard coming from his left arm. Intense pain radiated from his arm straight to his heart and he couldn't help but scream, "Aaaaaah..."

Luo Shaoyun gulped. "Luo Lang, is your sister a freakishly strong woman?" This strength appeared to be even stronger than his own. It should be noted that children nowadays had extremely sturdy bodies due to the absorption of gene agents to repair and supplement the body. Although it wasn't at the level of copper skin and iron bones, it was still strong enough that normal levels of strength shouldn't be able to hurt them.

"No, this is one of our family combat techniques — One-Inch Punch ¹!" Luo Lang wasn't secretive about it and he started giving Luo Shaoyun and the others a detailed explanation.

The One-Inch Punch wasn't an advanced technique; many families had similar strike techniques, so Luo Lang wasn't worried about others knowing its name. If the technique wasn't orally taught along with a physical demonstration, observers wouldn't be able to learn its secrets, so there was no need to fear it being stolen by others.

"Little Four, did you save a recording of Luo Chao's attack earlier?" Ling Lan's eyes lit up. This sort of strike technique was pretty good — it would be a good idea to take some time in the future to research it.

"Saved." Little Four's answer was met with Ling Lan's hearty approval. When Ling Lan wasn't paying attention, Little Four smugly made a victory 'V' with one hand. He would never tell Ling Lan that everything that had happened throughout her life, every moment from her birth till now, could be found within his databases. There would

never be any storage problems.

Seeing that the child's arm was broken, the teacher in charge of Luo Chao's arena immediately called a stop to the match and declared Luo Chao the winner. Although Luo Chao's opponent was unwilling to surrender, he could do nothing to fight this result and so could only walk off the stage with teary eyes. This time, he had lost due to impatience. He shouldn't have rushed, for his chances of winning had actually been much higher than Luo Chao's.

Luo Chao leapt at her brother excitedly and Luo Lang caught her in a hug. But then, with an unhappy expression, he chided, "Why did you use this method?" Although he was happy that his sister won, he didn't want his sister to win in a way which required her to get injured.

Luo Chao peered up timidly at Luo Lang. "My stamina was running out, and the opponent was still very steady, revealing no weak points. As I said before that my attacking speed is very slow, so, if I didn't use this method, I was afraid I wouldn't be able to hit him."

Luo Chao still wanted to nag, but Han Xuya interrupted a little unhappily, "It's fine as long as she won — did you want to see Luo Chao lose?"

Luo Lang was flabbergasted. "How could I?" And with that, he couldn't scold Luo Chao anymore. After all, Luo Chao had won!

Luo Chao sighed internally and sent a grateful look at Han Xuya. She still wasn't good at handling her elder brother's disapproving gaze. Surreptitiously, she glanced at Ling Lan and found Ling Lan looking back at her with a bright smile on his face and approval in his eyes. Her face bloomed red instantly.

He... is looking at me now! Luo Chao felt as if she was going to faint; her heart was throbbing so violently.

"Eh? Boss, after that little girl looked at you, she looks like she's going to faint. Oh, it must be that you're too fierce and scared her." Little Four recalled the violence he was subjected to when he first met Ling Lan and immediately empathised.

Chapter 78

Advancing in One Move!

Ling Lan glared at Little Four exasperatedly, *"You still have the free time to worry about other people? Have you figured out the secrets of that One-Inch Punch yet?"*

At those words, Little Four puffed out his cheeks. This request of his boss was just too unreasonable — how could the secrets of the One-Inch Punch be so easily deciphered? Such little consideration for her followers, this was obviously child labour abuse!

Hmph, he wanted to lodge a complaint... er, that is, find a helper!

Little Four's gaze was mournful as he took one last glance at Ling Lan, whose attention had already shifted back to the outside world, and slowly disappeared from the mind-space, going heaven knows where.

Luo Chao's victorious return gave Luo Lang and the others the heart to go check out Luo Shaoyun's and Li Jinghong's battle results. As expected, Luo Shaoyun successfully advanced into the top 100, but Li Jinghong failed. The students of Special Class-A were not herbivores ¹ — to achieve an upset was really as difficult as mounting the heavens.

When Luo Lang discovered who Li Jinghong's opponent was, he couldn't help but pity him for his bad luck. It turned out that Li Jinghong's opponent was the second-rank, Wu Jiong. Even Luo Lang himself was uncertain if he could beat that fellow for sure — if they fought, the odds would be fifty-fifty, or perhaps Luo Lang's odds of winning might be even lower.

Not long after, Qi Long bounded back happily. His opponent had been someone from the merit classes, and so had not given him much trouble. He had handily defeated the other within ten moves and now returned triumphant.

Meanwhile, Yuan Youyun was still fighting and probably wouldn't be done for a while longer. Soon after, the fourth matches began. Han Jijyun and He Chaoyang went up, and they were followed by Luo Lang for the fifth match and Ling Lan for the sixth

match. Just like that, they all took their turns on stage, and Ling Lan's group of ten finished their fights for the first half of the day.

Both Li Jinghong and He Chaoyang from the merit classes had ended their run, while the remaining eight had successfully entered the top 100, guaranteeing their places in the special classes. Clearly, the positions of the original special class students were very secure; for any child from the merit classes to overthrow anyone, the journey was still long.

Of the students who advanced to the top 100, Ling Lan was the one who advanced the most easily — defeating the merit class student she was up against with just one move. Of course, this method of winning almost crumbled the other child's confidence. Luckily, the refereeing teacher immediately provided some counselling and spiritual guidance, thus saving the child's future. Because of this, Ling Lan received quite a few displeased glares from that teacher. His gaze was clearly saying that she should have shown some mercy and let her opponent show off some moves at least, why did she have to be so ruthless...

Against the teacher's pointed gaze, Ling Lan could only rub her nose and quietly slink away. Frankly, she could not be blamed. The moment her opponent had moved, she had clearly seen the other's weak point. This weak point had shone with such a brilliant light that she had thrown a punch before she knew it. By the time she was aware of it, the opponent had already been knocked off the stage, so it was too late even if she wanted to let the other show off a few moves.

Aside from the oddball Ling Lan, the next best results were those who managed to defeat their opponents in ten moves. There were quite a few in that category — the top 5 of Special Class-A all managed it, along with Qi Long and Luo Lang.

Just like that, the battles in the first half of the day were over. Li Jinghong and He Chaoyang collected their emotions and happily joined in the celebrations of their companions who advanced. Together, they came to the school canteen and prepared to indulge in a good feast to reward themselves.

Ling Lan decided to be generous at that moment, agreeing to withdraw 5000 credits so they could order several delicacies and treats they'd been drooling over for a long time in celebration. All of them ate happily. After eating their fill and resting for a bit, they welcomed the second round of the fights for the day where the top 100 would be narrowed down to the top 50. In other words, it was the final battles to determine the

Class-A positions.

Because the number of combatants had been halved, there were only three match slots in the afternoon battle rounds. Ling Lan was no longer the finishing act this time, but was up first instead.

Ling Lan's opponent was a student from Special Class-B. In these top 100 to top 50 advancement rounds, the Special Class-A students would not be placed in a situation where they'd have to face one another. The academy wouldn't be so brain dead as to let the outstanding students face off so early and lose their chance to advance that way. Therefore, if the Class-B students wanted to enter Class-A, they would have to defeat a Class-A student to prove their worth.

The moment Ling Lan stepped on stage, she sensed an extremely blatant warning stare. She looked towards the source of the stare and immediately felt a little guilty, cold sweat beading her forehead. Dammit, why was her luck so terrible?

It turned out that the referee in charge of their arena was, of all people, the same teacher referee from her morning bout. Seeing Ling Lan appear, the narrowed gaze of the teacher was filled with warning, wordlessly telling her that she should tone down a little and not hurry to end things this time. No matter what, she should still leave some room for her peer to keep his confidence.

Ling Lan secretly wiped off the sweat from her forehead, reminding herself that she could not make the same mistake as in the previous round. For this reason, she purposefully put both arms behind her back and gripped each arm with the other tightly, so they would keep each other under control. This way, no matter how strong her reflexes were, she wouldn't be able to move so quickly.

Although Ling Lan was doing all this out of good intentions, in the other's eyes, Ling Lan's action of putting both arms behind her was really just too arrogant and obviously demeaning. He felt as if he had been shamed; his small young face turned bright red in anger.

The moment he heard the referee yell 'start', he pounced. There was no probing involved; he attacked directly with a powerful whirlwind side kick. The force behind the kick could certainly be considered as all the strength his body could muster — it was clear just how angry the opponent was, almost driven to the edge of irrationality, which was why he had charged headlong at Ling Lan to attack without any other

considerations.

Regardless of how much Ling Lan had prepared before the fight, it was all, unfortunately, useless. Ling Lan saw the opponent's fierce kick coming at her, and as it got closer and closer, an absolutely fatal opening appeared before her.

Typically, any move, when nearing the end of its force, would have this sort of opening. The only question was, how big the opening was.

Ling Lan's reflexes were definitely top-notch. Seeing this opening, she didn't even have time to think, reflexively counterattacking...

Wasn't Ling Lan's arms gripping onto each other behind her back? Why could she still counterattack?

Indeed, Ling Lan's arms were gripped tightly with no way of attacking. However, who asked the opponent to attack with his feet? Thus, Ling Lan also reflexively fought back with her feet, instinctively sending a leg kicking out.

When her foot slammed heavily into a human body, she already knew that she had messed up. Unfortunately, by this time, it was too late for her to pull back her strength. The one saving grace was that she had not used the Wave Stacking Art she had learned from the learning space and had even controlled her own physical strength to 50%.

Even so, the opponent was still sent flying off the stage by her kick. This beautifully clean kick drew shocked gasps from all the students in the audience, as well as made the senior students who had inadvertently witnessed the scene sober up. The scene also drew the infuriated gaze of the teacher referee. Dammit, didn't I ask you to take it easy? Why are you doing it again and again and again...

The teacher's eyes were full of resentment and blame — Ling Lan couldn't take it any longer and shrunk back, jumping off the stage to slip away.

Ling Lan's clean and decisive one-move defeat of her opponent drew the attention of all the first grade students. Remember, Ling Lan's opponent had been a Special Class-B student — although the Class-A students were indeed stronger than the Class-B students by a head, it wasn't at the level where the former would be able to defeat the latter in just one move. Ling Lan's impressive performance caused everyone to start speculating in secret. Ling Lan was most likely the strongest within the first grade — the current best student or first rank was all just in name.

The subsequent matches seemed to prove the point. The Class-A first-rank Li Yingjie had gone up against a Class-B student and had only managed to defeat the other after 28 moves. This result, in comparison with the results of previous years, was actually quite outstanding. Unfortunately, in comparison with the aberrant Ling Lan, Li Yingjie's performance became extremely average. This caused Li Yingjie to be filled with anger and hatred, and he now had yet another reason to hate Ling Lan: That arrogant fellow had stolen the wind from his sails, he was really too despicable...

Qi Long's performance was also pretty good — he managed to defeat his opponent at the 30th move — while Luo Lang did a little worse, but also managed to defeat his opponent within 50 moves. These results were already considered above average within Class-A.

Meanwhile, Han Jijyun had got caught up in a drawn-out battle. It couldn't be helped, for Han Jijyun's strength was his exceptional intelligence, while his combat abilities were considerably weaker. In addition, he didn't have any finishing moves and so could only draw out the battle to while away his opponent's stamina. Finally, after almost 300 moves, the clever Han Jijyun managed to find an almost imperceptible opportunity and used it to defeat his opponent, successfully making it into the top 50.

Han Xuya, Luo Chao, Luo Shaoyun, and Yuan Youyun, who had originally been part of Class-B, were all stopped here. They couldn't make it into the top 50 and so would remain in Class-B for the next six months. This proved once again that progressing even just one step further was definitely not that easy.

At the end of this day's battles, the name list of the top 50 was officially released. 49 names stayed the same, remaining as Class-A members, while 1 member was changed. The original 2nd place from the bottom was defeated by Class-B's 2nd place from the top, who successfully took his place on the new roster. Successfully advancing into the top 50, he became the only child who managed an upset.

This result really made the 1st place of Class-B want to cry. In fact, he was actually stronger than the 2nd place, however, he had lost to the last place of Class-A, Lin Zhong-qing. His luck was really a little terrible; Lin Zhong-qing's strength was actually much stronger than the person ranked before him, leaving no chance for the Class-B first place to win. In the end, he could only watch as his weaker classmate successfully advanced, while he had to wait for yet another six months.

In reality, the classes were basically settled by the end of this day. Over the following

few days, the internal class ranking battles would be held and the ranking battles for the top 50, in particular, would be the centre of everyone's attention.

On the fifth day, the internal class ranking battles began. The match-ups were announced on the day itself and, as usual, had been determined by ranks. The 1st-place was matched up against the last place, the 2nd was up against the 49th, and so on and so forth.

Seeing this match-up list, the Class-A 34th place was the first to start wailing. The first person he was up against was the one who had advanced into the top 50 by defeating all of his opponents in one move — Ling Lan. The classmates who were on good terms with him all patted his shoulders in consolation, but they were actually secretly sighing in relief, glad it wasn't them.

Chapter 79

Talent Killer!

Alone in a corner, Lin Zhong-qing stood with his head bowed, carefully reading through the information on his communicator about his fight venue and match order. He heard the voices of the surrounding students consoling the 34th place and surreptitiously lifted his head to look at Ling Lan, who was currently engaged in conversation with Qi Long and the others. His gaze was complicated and hard to decipher.

Of course, Lin Zhong-qing had known that Ling Lan was very strong, otherwise he wouldn't have been able to get Qi Long and Luo Lang, whose strength was on par with the top three of Class-A, to submit to him. Even the abnormally intelligent Han Jijyun had willingly acknowledged him as his boss. (One could tell all this just from their conversations and how they acted.) Still, he hadn't expected Ling Lan to be this strong. Advancing this far with consecutive one move take downs... it was quite terrifying.

It should be known that this result would be brag worthy at any school. Even the self-titled ultimate genius Li Yingjie was unable to do this. Although Ling Lan seemed very cold and aloof, he was not against helping out if it was something he could do with a lift of his hand, just like when Lin Zhong-qing had needed his help previously...

Thinking of this, a bitter smile pulled at the corners of Lin Zhong-qing's lips, and regret settled on the surface of his heart.

Sometimes, what's lost is lost. If he hadn't thought to take advantage of Ling Lan back then and had chosen to serve him sincerely instead, perhaps he might have had a chance to obtain Ling Lan's friendship. Unfortunately, now it was no longer possible. No one would be willing to be friends with someone who had once used them.

Lin Zhong-qing's gaze cleared up instantly, as he ruthlessly strangled the rebellious bit of hope within his heart. The experiences of his youth had made it impossible for him to put down his defences to trust in someone else... which was why he was destined to be forever alone. Friendship and sentiment and anything else along those lines were all just passing clouds.

Lin Zhong-qing was patiently awaiting the start of the fights, when he found that two people he loathed had appeared beside him. It was Li Yingjie and his lackey, the one who was third-last in Class-A.

Lin Zhong-qing really looked down on him. Although they were insignificant in Class-A, being at the bottom of the heap, that didn't mean that they should throw away their dignity to become someone else's lackey, allowing another to order them around and yell at them, just for certain benefits. Of course, if they were like Qi Long and Luo Lang, who submitted due to the other's personal charisma and strength, and called the other Boss out of their own personal will, he would never view them with contempt, but would instead admire them.

Unfortunately, this punk Li Yingjie, other than being stronger than others, really had no charisma or qualities that would lead others to submit to him. He was just no match for Ling Lan. At this time, Lin Zhong-qing still hadn't noticed that his heart had already acknowledged Ling Lan.

Perhaps sensing Lin Zhong-qing's contempt for him, Li Yingjie's lackey, that third-last in Class-A, actually took the initiative to mock, "Yo, isn't this our dead last Lin Zhong-qing? Who knew you would still be in Class-A, how lucky." Since the second-last had already been thrown out of the class by the Class-B second-place, he could only seek a little sense of superiority from Lin Zhong-qing.

Lin Zhong-qing did not care about the other's taunts. If he didn't even have this bit of tolerance, how could he have survived those six years as a research lab rat? He only glanced impassively at the lackey, before lowering his head to look back at his own communicator. This clearly dismissive behaviour made the other's face flush red immediately.

Lin Zhong-qing's attitude caused the surrounding students to break out into laughter. Lin Zhong-qing was on good terms with most of his classmates, and could be considered a socially intelligent person. However, when it came to Li Yingjie's group, Lin Zhong-qing's attitude was rather unfriendly.

No matter how tolerant a person was, when someone pressed the wrong buttons, they would not be able to just continue tolerating. Lin Zhong-qing, who had already lost six years of his freedom, prized his independence the most. Meanwhile, Li Yingjie had wanted to use forceful measures to get Lin Zhong-qing to become his subordinate, and be at his beck and call. This, had completely stomped all over Lin Zhong-qing's

buttons, which was the main reason for Lin Zhong-qing's hostility against Li Yingjie. Unfortunately, till now, Li Yingjie still didn't know where he had gone wrong, and was still trying to use force to get what he wanted, causing Lin Zhong-qing to hate him more and more.

Lin Zhong-qing's attitude enraged Li Yingjie's lackey. He couldn't help but shout, "Don't get too cocky! Later, Boss Li will definitely teach you a lesson!" By the end, his tone held an obvious trace of schadenfreude.

After hearing this, Lin Zhong-qing lifted his head and looked at him strangely. That look was the look one used to look at an idiot. Seeing this, the lackey was about to blow his top, actually raising his hand in preparation to teach Lin Zhong-qing a lesson right then and there.

Lin Zhong-qing waited. If the other initiated an attack, then he would have an excuse to retaliate.

Seeing a private battle about to break out, everyone's gaze was drawn over. Li Yingjie, who was standing by the side, frowned slightly, and yelled out tersely, "Yuan Li, draw back, now!"

Li Yingjie's shout made Yuan Li stop immediately, and he scurried back to Li Yingjie's side with a panicked expression. Ever since agreeing to become Li Yingjie's follower, he had certainly received quite a few benefits — high-grade gene agent, which he had to save up so hard for before, was now given to him, one tube every three months. This was also the real reason why his strength had remained consistent enough so he could keep up with the others, however, at the same time, he also lost a lot to get this, such as his pride...

Li Yingjie stopped Yuan Li, and only then did he look at Lin Zhong-qing, and say haughtily, "Lin Zhong-qing, stop taunting my subordinate. Purposefully picking a fight... why don't we make a bet instead?"

Lin Zhong-qing snorted in laughter. Taunt Yuan Li? Was he so free that he had nothing else better to do? Bullsh*t!

Li Yingjie didn't care whether Lin Zhong-qing agreed with him or not. He continued, "Next round, should be the fight between you and me. Why don't we make a bet? If you can hold up against me for 50 moves, then I'll forgive the past, but if I defeat you

within 50 moves, then you'll have to acknowledge me as your boss." In the end, Li Yingjie still hadn't given up on bringing Lin Zhong-qing under his control.

When Lin Zhong-qing heard this, he couldn't help but burst out laughing. "Hey, Li Yingjie, is your brain dysfunctional?"

At these words, Li Yingjie's entire face turned dark and cold. From his perspective, he had already given Lin Zhong-qing plenty of face, but unexpectedly, his kind intentions made Lin Zhong-qing become so brazen. Actually daring to be so impudent to his face, he must really want to die. A fierce light flashed through Li Yingjie's eyes. He decided that in the upcoming match, he would utterly destroy Lin Zhong-qing, and chase him out of Special Class-A for good.

However, Lin Zhong-qing's response ripped through Li Yingjie's scheming. "You should probably confirm who your opponent actually is."

Li Yingjie's first reaction was to assume there had been a mistake. He hurriedly searched for the notification on his communicator, and saw that he was up against the 50th place. Wasn't the 50th place Lin Zhong-qing?

He continued to read the rest of the notification, and sure enough, the name listed at the 50th place was not Lin Zhong-qing, but a name he wasn't familiar with, meaning that that person was definitely not someone from Class-A.

With a flash of realisation, Li Yingjie abruptly understood. The Class-B second-place who had defeated their Class-A second-last in the previous round, had been automatically assigned last place in their class by the academy's A.I. because he had just qualified for Class-A. Meanwhile, Lin Zhong-qing had automatically risen by one rank, becoming the 49th rank. In other words, his next opponent was not Lin Zhong-qing, but the new ex-Class-B student. He had been mistaken.

"What a shame... I had really wanted to bet with you." Lin Zhong-qing slowly drew closer to Li Yingjie. Just as he was about to brush by, he suddenly stopped, and threw down this statement. "50 moves? How weak. Ling Lan would have been able to defeat me in 1 move. Compared to him, you are really too weak."

These words made Li Yingjie's face burn red in anger. He clenched his fists, forcing himself to stay calm. The academy prohibited students from fighting privately. If any such incidents were discovered by the academy, the students involved were very likely

to be downgraded and punished. This was something Li Yingjie could not accept — the moment he dropped down to Class-B, he might even lose the right to contend for the Li family inheritance.

Meanwhile, Ling Lan's group, who had already noticed the commotion around Lin Zhong-qing, had heard the words Lin Zhong-qing said as he left, and all of them couldn't help but frown.

"This punk is again adding to your hate value." These days, Han Jijyun had started habitually using some of Ling Lan's vocabulary from her previous world when he spoke. He felt that those terms were just too descriptive — such as this 'hate value', apt and brilliant.

A fierce expression appeared on Luo Lang's pretty face. "I'll go teach him a lesson."

"Count me in," said Qi Long hurriedly. He wasn't in it to teach the other a lesson, but was just looking for a chance to fight.

Ling Lan lifted her hand to grab hold of Luo Lang's cheek, and pinched and pulled at it harshly for a bit, until Luo Lang was begging for mercy, before letting go. "Don't be hasty. If we really taught him a lesson, that would just be playing into his hands."

"Ah..." Luo Lang was stupefied, a little uncomprehending.

Han Jijyun eyes, however, lit up, thinking of something. Ling Lan shared a smiling glance with him. It was always so easy talking to intelligent people.

Qi Long rubbed his head, but didn't say anything. He believed that Han Jijyun would explain things for him sooner or later.

Qi Long trust was not misplaced; as expected, Han Jijyun began explaining things to Qi Long and Luo Lang, "Lin Zhong-qing is currently struggling to find an excuse to interact with us. If you go look for him, isn't that exactly what he wants?"

"But I would be going to teach him a lesson," said Luo Lang stubbornly.

Han Jijyun smiled wryly as he shook his head. "You won't be able to handle him. If he thickens his skin and clings to you, you probably won't be able to deny him. Just think of what happened before..."

Luo Lang abruptly had nothing more to say. That one month, Ling Lan had always kept cool and ignored Lin Zhong-qing, Han Jijyun had been sly and had not given Lin Zhong-qing much opportunity to get close, while Qi Long had focused on his training, unconcerned about anything else. Only Luo Lang had found himself subconsciously talking to Lin Zhong-qing, and he had even helped Lin Zhong-qing out of several tricky situations...

"Alright, I'll keep away from him." Luo Lang's strength was that he would always fix his mistakes if he knew about them, although he might still make the same mistake again later on...

The morning battles officially began. This time, there were only two match rounds. Han Jijyun was up for the first round, while the remaining three were all up for the second. However, by the time Ling Lan and the other two had returned after their battles, Han Jijyun's fight was still ongoing — it was clear just how difficult it was for Han Jijyun to fight.

In the end, Han Jijyun's stamina was better than his opponent's, so he managed to outlast the other. Even so, Han Jijyun was almost burned out and was immediately sent to a healing pod to recover his energy.

Qi Long and Luo Lang did not have much difficulty. Qi Long had defeated his opponent after exchanging roughly 50 moves to clinch the victory, while Luo Lang did slightly worse, only managing to defeat his opponent after nearly 80 moves to advance. As for Ling Lan...

The moment the fight began, Ling Lan had not dared to open her eyes. She was afraid that she would again see some fatal weakness, and then her body would reflexively attack and steamroll the opponent.

After a night of research, Ling Lan had finally figured out the reason. These uncontrollable reflexive movements were the final remnants of her spiritual loss of control. There wasn't actually a problem — her body and mind were still in the process of syncing up after she returned to normal, so the issue would resolve itself after another one and a half months. Ling Lan could only blame herself for recovering too late, so there wasn't enough time for the residual effects to clear out, resulting in her current predicament.

To prevent once again defeating her opponent in one move, Ling Lan decided to close her eyes this time. She thought that, if her eyes were closed so she couldn't see the opponent's attack, then it would be impossible for her to attack reflexively anymore, right? Of course, Ling Lan only dared to do so because she had full confidence in her two ears. In the learning space, one of her training sessions under Number Five was in a pitch-black sealed room, where she had to dodge the attacks of hidden weapons without sight. In the beginning, she had died horribly countless times, but eventually, she managed to evade everything to emerge unharmed. This experience had given her a pair of extremely sensitive ears, with the trained ability to discern movement and positions just by listening to the wind.

However, even so, after dodging about 10 moves, Ling Lan could hold back no longer. With just a slip in attention, her eager foot shot out in a kick.

And then, the opponent was cleanly sent tumbling off the stage...

Ling Lan opened her eyes, and immediately saw the almost apoplectic referee. Her heart dropped — why was it this teacher referee again? As Ling Lan had kept her eyes closed the moment she stepped on stage, she had really not noticed that the one in charge of refereeing her match this time was still the same referee from her previous two matches.

Ling Lan hurriedly put an innocent look on her face, her large bright eyes broadcasting only one thing — she really hadn't done it intentionally. In order to escape responsibility, Ling Lan decided to play up her cuteness just this once.

The referee charged over, the muscles on his face a little twisted, as he said through gnashing teeth, "Couldn't you have pretended to struggle for a few moves with your opponent before defeating him?"

Ling Lan's expression became even more innocent. Didn't she already dodge for about 10 moves?

Seeing that Ling Lan still hadn't figured out her mistake, the teacher couldn't take it anymore, yelling, "You bloody kept your eyes closed, and kept both hands behind your back, and waltzed around cockily daring him to hit you — do you really think we're all blind?"

Clearly, in others' eyes, Ling Lan had still defeated her opponent in one move despite

what she did. Moreover, the blow to the other child's confidence this time was even more severe.

In her previous two matches, they could still comfort the children who lost that Ling Lan was just lucky, or that he had just been born with supernatural strength, or perhaps the children themselves had been too careless and had lost to Ling Lan's sneak attack... these excuses had been enough to salvage the children's confidence. But now, what Ling Lan just did was obviously telling his opponent that he really didn't even consider him a threat. Even if he kept his eyes closed and gave you a 10 move handicap, you would still be unable to hit him, and in the end, he only had to use one move to defeat you. This blow was just too heavy. The teachers were at a loss, unable to find any excuses to use to comfort the losing child this time — tell me, how could they not be frantic?

This was why the teacher could no longer hold his temper. This brat Ling Lan was clearly a talent killer!

Chapter 80

Advancing Into the Top 13!

However, no matter how angry or resentful the teacher was, he could do nothing about Ling Lan. If the children in Class-A were the talent that they treasured and wanted to cultivate, then Ling Lan was most certainly the largest pearl deep within their hearts. The appreciation they had for him was immeasurable. This was why the teacher could only yell somewhat angrily at Ling Lan for a while, reminding him to not be so heavy-handed next time to save them the trouble.

Even if they really, really cherished Ling Lan, they still had to maintain their impartiality on the outside. No matter what was said, the other children were also the future pillars of the Federation — they couldn't just give up on them.

The teacher's demeanour really resembled that of a parent whose child had hit a child from another family. As a parent, he had to scold his own child just to placate the other party; as for whether he was actually gleeful inside... hehehe, I'm sure you all understand.

Just like that, under the teacher's repetitive nagging, Ling Lan could only nod obediently to show she understood. It couldn't be helped. Ling Lan still had to take the oppression of the academy for another 10 years, so she had no choice but to carry on with her tail between her legs ¹. Of course, Ling Lan was personally a child who was so obedient that she couldn't be any more obedient, so obedient that she had never gone through a rebellious phase in her previous life...

Thinking of this, Ling Lan considered — should she try being rebellious once in this life? But when her mum Lan Luofeng's tear-blurred eyes appeared within Ling Lan's mind, paired with her loving yet melancholic expression, Ling Lan just couldn't muster up the heart to think any more about it. Yup, she definitely couldn't handle the acting of her Oscar-level diva mum. If Ling Lan was a little fox ² still in training, then her mum was definitely a grand fox demon that had been through a thousand years of cultivation. They were just on completely different levels.

More than once, she had lost to her mum's waterworks. Even if she knew that Lan Luofeng was just faking it, she still fell for it. It was all because she couldn't bear to see

others cry. This weakness that she had brought with her from her previous life caused her to be fully trapped within the manipulations of her thousand-year fox demon mother. Just like Monkey-Sun ³ within the Buddha's hand, she would forever be unable to escape from her mother's palm.

At this thought, Ling Lan was shrouded in gloom. She began resenting that dad of hers who had died so early, leaving behind such a troublesome burden for her. If her dad were still alive, this thousand-year fox demon would have been her dad's responsibility.

However, this was all just fanciful thinking by Ling Lan. Lan Luofeng was, in fact, Ling Lan's sweet burden for this life, which she carried with pain, yet also with much joy...

When the morning's official advancement battles ended, the children who advanced had no more business in the hall and were free to do whatever they wanted. Meanwhile, the students who had been eliminated continued to remain in the combat hall to wait for the system to once again announce the battle pairings for the rankings of the 26th place to the 50th place. Of course, this had nothing to do with Ling Lan's group of four so they went straight to Qi Long's and the other two boys' villa. There, they settled down on the living room sofa, and comfortably watched the fights while having warm drinks.

Among the first grade Special Class-A 26th to 50th ranking battles, the only one whom they were concerned about was Lin Zhong-qing. Who asked Lin Zhong-qing to have impure intentions towards them at the beginning? This caused Ling Lan and the others to involuntarily start paying attention to him.

During the advancement battles from top 50 to top 25, Lin Zhong-qing had been up against the Class-A second-place, Wu Jiong. Lin Zhong-qing had lost as everyone expected; however, unlike what everyone expected, he had not been defeated quickly by Wu Jiong. Instead, he had battled with Wu Jiong for over 100 moves before finally being brought down by Wu Jiong, who had been patiently waiting for an opportunity, when he ran out of stamina.

These results caused an uproar among the Class-A students. However, what the students were stunned by was not Lin Zhong-qing's incredible improvement, but rather, Ling Lan's strength. Because they still remembered how, when school first

started, Ling Lan had once beaten Lin Zhong-qing easily with just one punch. Didn't this prove that Ling Lan's strength was already far beyond the top 3 of Class-A?

At that time, the gazes directed Ling Lan's way from the other students had been filled with deep apprehension. The children from Class-A had forgotten that half a year had already gone by since Ling Lan's fight with Lin Zhong-qing — Lin Zhong-qing's current strength could no longer be compared to his strength back then. If Ling Lan fought with Lin Zhong-qing once more, she might not be able to defeat him in one move anymore... however, doing so in two moves was still very possible.

However, Lin Zhong-qing's subsequent performance gradually eased their classmates' fears. In the ranking fights to determine his actual ranking, Lin Zhong-qing proved his strength. He consecutively defeated many people, finally settling in the 28th spot.

This result may not seem brilliant, but compared to his rank at the start of the school year, his improvement was undoubtedly astonishing. It should be known that the Class-A rankings were not upset so easily because Class-A was made up of various prodigies from all over, who were all exceptional. To go up in rank among this group of freakish talents... it was really extremely difficult. This also proved that Lin Zhong-qing's natural talent was prodigious, though of course he also put in more effort than the other students, otherwise he wouldn't have improved this much.

Lin Zhong-qing's performance this time made Ling Lan's group of four start to take him seriously. This little fellow who had a belly full of plots and schemes, though unlikely to be a threat to Ling Lan, could very well become a rival for Qi Long and the others. Han Jijun, especially, felt the pressure most keenly because Lin Zhong-qing's future development was looking to be an intelligence-type soldier just like him.

In the meantime, Ling Lan and the others also watched several matches of the popular upper grade students. As expected, they were all formidable opponents, full of amazing moves. Ling Lan was delighted, making Little Four copy everything down. If they could decipher just one or two of the moves, Ling Lan would already benefit greatly.

The combat arts taught by the learning space was definitely top-notch but was way too lethal. Every move, every stance, was aimed at an opponent's fatal spots, making it rather unsuited for this sort of arena sparring tournaments held by the academy. And while the Ling family had their own combat arts, it had the same problem — the combat arts of the loyalists were naturally geared towards killing an enemy efficiently.

Of course, the Ling family did not lack for those so-called 'orthodox' combat arts as well, but with Ling Xiao's death and Lan Luofeng falling out with the entire Ling family, Ling Lan never did have the chance to learn those combat arts.

This was why Ling Lan couldn't drag out the fight for a few moves before defeating her schoolmates. The moment she moved, it was a killing blow — how could the fight be prolonged? Therefore, Ling Lan was extremely interested in these random skills and techniques she saw in the academy though they were looked down upon by the instructors within the learning space.

Ahem, she needed to give face to the academy teachers, didn't she? At the least, she should show that she had already listened to their advice.

When all of the fights ended, Ling Lan's group prepared to eat lunch. However, this time they didn't go eat at the canteen but went online directly to order some takeout, requesting the canteen to send several deluxe set meals straight to the villa.

After they had eaten, Ling Lan and the others rested for a little while and then headed back to the combat hall. Right now, the combat hall was no longer as raucous as it had been at the start; it had already become extremely quiet. Other than the Class-A students of the ten grades, who were waiting for their match-ups to be announced by the system, almost everyone else had gone back to their dorms to watch the ranking battles of the top 25.

Very quickly, the notifications came. Ling Lan opened it to look and was immediately dumbfounded. It turned out that she had received a bye for this round. It was very likely that the academy was afraid that Ling Lan would commit another one-hit-kill and cause them trouble, so they had arranged for her to just move on for this round.

The moment the news spread, the other children in the top 25 actually cheered in unison — it looked like no one wanted to go up against Ling Lan so early. Although they still needed to fight a proper match, it was still better to have some hope instead of having to face the hopeless situation of going up against Ling Lan.

The match-ups of the fights this time were truly randomised. There was no longer much differentiation in strength among the top 25, so they would be paired up randomly by the system to fight it out. But in this way, tragedy struck. On Ling Lan's side, Han Jijyun and Qi Long were matched as opponents, creating the first occurrence of an internal fight between the members of Ling Lan's group. This made the other

students extraordinarily happy — there was no helping it, Ling Lan's group was just too strong, so one less to worry about was a great stroke of luck.

Han Jijyun reacted in a straightforward manner. The moment the fight started, he raised his hand to signal his surrender. He knew he was no match for Qi Long in terms of combat. The two of them often sparred together for practice, so Han Jijyun knew very well what the final result would be. As such, there was no reason to waste his strength.

Luo Lang's opponent was comparably weaker. Still, the students who entered the top 25 all had exceptional strength — against them, Luo Lang did not have an overwhelming advantage; the odds of him winning were 60-40 at most.

Luo Lang, who was only just a little stronger, was very cautious in his fights. He could clearly remember Ling Lan's reminder at the start of the battles. Capsizing a boat in a ditch⁴? He would never allow that sort of thing to happen to him. Still, Boss was really Boss. Why was everything he said so meaningful... Ahem ahem, yet another unwitting little guy had been won over by the charm of this sort of olden sayings; unknowingly, his admiration towards Ling Lan had risen a little bit more.

Luo Lang fought very carefully and seriously, giving his opponent no chances from start to end. And once his opponent's stamina was about finished, Luo Lang swooped in to grab hold of an unintended small opening exposed by the opponent, knocking the other off the stage, and advanced to the top 13.

The original top 9 ranks of Class-A, as expected, all successfully advanced. However, the 10th rank unexpectedly lost to the student who was originally in 14th place and was knocked out. Including Ling Lan, Qi Long, and Luo Lang, those within the top 13 were officially settled.

After that, the ranking battles to determine the 14th to the 25th place were held. Han Jijyun performed impressively, defeating two people, getting a bye, and then finally going up against the original 10th place to score a win. He ended up in rank 14, which was a significant improvement from his initial rank 21.

However, as his original results had been purposefully suppressed by the hacker of the Bladed Special Ops Team, this was just him returning to his rightful spot now. Of course, if he hadn't had to go up against Qi Long during the advancement rounds into the top 13, he might have perhaps even gone up a few more ranks.

Just like that, the day's ranking battles were over and Ling Lan remained firmly in the category of those who advanced with ease. Qi Long could also be considered as one within that category — after all, he hadn't had to fight at all for his second match since Han Jijyun had just surrendered, letting him advance easily. Luo Lang was the most exhausted one. When they returned to the villa, without saying a word, he immediately shuffled off to lie down in the restoration pod within his room to rest up properly.

There was no time to waste right now; he had to seize every minute and every second he could to recover his energy. Tomorrow morning, there would be two critical matches — from top 13 to top 7, and from top 7 to top 4 — and Luo Lang didn't want to stop there. If possible, he still wanted to participate in the afternoon's semi-finals and finals... and to realize that wish, he could not afford to be the least bit sloppy.

Chapter 81

Initiate Disciples!

The night passed in silence. The next day, Ling Lan's group of four arrived at the combat hall bright and early. At this time there were even less students in the combat hall, with more teachers present instead. Their objective in coming here now was to adopt one or two outstanding children for personal instruction — this was also one of their responsibilities as an instructor.

For the record, any child who could remain till the final day was most certainly an exceptional seedling that had managed to weather the beating of waves and the erosion of sand — a buildable talent, certainly good enough to satisfy their conditions for taking on a personal student. Of course, whether or not a match was made still depended on compatibility.

Mind you, for some of the stronger instructors, taking on an apprentice not only depended on talent, but a large part also depended on affinity at first glance.

The tournament soon started, and first up were the fights for the advancement of the top 13 into the top 7. This round, the one to receive a bye was no longer Ling Lan but the Class-A first-rank Li Yingjie.

Ling Lan saw this notification within the communicator and couldn't help but wonder if the academy arranged byes according to a student's strength? If the next to receive a bye was Wu Jiong or Qi Long, then this assumption would pretty much be verified. In Ling Lan's eyes, Li Yingjie, Wu Jiong, and Qi Long were of the same level.

Ling Lan's opponent was the Class-A ninth-rank Qin Yi. She had seen Qin Yi's combat style before — he was an intelligence-type fighter, who liked to first figure out the opponent's true strength before countering, so almost every fight of his started with him dancing around the opponent.

Ling Lan had never encountered this type of combat opponent before. In the learning space, Instructor Number One upheld the principle of sure kills in one blow, and was definitely a pure suppression-type attacker. Instructor Number Nine held fast to the most orthodox combat ideal — if soldiers come, send a general to defend; if the waters

rise, build a dam. This principle advocated the combat style of countering a move with a move, exchanging one blow for another. Instructor Number Five's combat style was even nastier than his character — as long as he could obtain victory, he would do anything. Recalling some of Instructor Number Five's methods, Ling Lan couldn't suppress her shudders. Even now, she still felt the chills running through her body. The training of that time had almost destroyed her 'three outlooks' ¹.

Qi Long, Luo Lang and Han Jijyun, who were Ling Lan's regular sparring partners, were also not this type of opponent. Qi Long liked to start with a bang and end with a bang — fighting with him made for the wildest and the most intense battles, not requiring much thought. Because Qi Long wouldn't give you the time to strategize and think of your next move — you could only pull up your sleeves and throw yourself into the fight if you wanted to keep up with his wild attacks which pelted at you like rain.

Luo Lang's combat style was of the same stream as Instructor Number Nine's, however, the difference in their abilities were like heaven and earth. For Ling Lan, handling Luo Lang was the easiest and most thoughtless thing, because Ling Lan was just too familiar with Luo Lang's style of attack.

Meanwhile, Han Jijyun was the weakest among the four of them. Aware of his own weakness, he liked to experiment with strange moves when fighting them. Every time he fought he would use a different combat style — who knows where he collected that many combat styles from — but unfortunately, due to the difference in strength, he had never been able to achieve very good results in the end. Only a few times, when Luo Lang had not adjusted in time, had Han Jijyun managed to wrest victory from his hands. But against the much stronger Qi Long and Ling Lan, Han Jijyun had not won even once. This also proved that when there was enough distance between strength levels, all schemes and plots, and all the strange moves in the world, were useless.

Therefore, Ling Lan was particularly alert in facing this upcoming match with Qin Yi. Of course, it wasn't that Ling Lan was worried that Qin Yi would give her any trouble in advancing, but rather, she wanted to be ready to process any insights she might obtain from fighting an opponent with a different style, which could enrich her battle experience.

Meanwhile, Qi Long was up against the 7th-rank of their class, Xu Zhizhi. Coincidentally, Xu Zhizhi's combat style was almost the same as Qi Long's, so this match between them was definitely going to be bursting with passion and energy.

Luo Lang was relatively unlucky. He, who had been plagued with horrendous luck over the last few days, had actually been matched up with the 3rd-rank of Class-A, Ye Xu. Any child who made it into the top 3 of Class-A was definitely some supreme genius, and would most certainly have outstanding combat abilities... this was obviously going to be another tough fight for Luo Lang.

When Luo Lang saw his opponent's name, his entire face collapsed, and he could almost cry. This was undoubtedly a tough bone that would be extremely hard on the teeth. Even if he managed to win this match by luck, he would probably be unable to continue fighting due to his depleted stamina, which would mean that he could only stop here, fated not to see the next match. It should be known that the matches for the top 7 to advance into the top 4 would follow right after — would he have any hope of winning without having any time to recover his energy?

The answer was that he most definitely would not... how could he not be depressed?

Helplessly, Ling Lan patted Luo Lang's shoulder, consoling him weakly, "Luo Lang, just do your best!" She just couldn't bear to see Luo Lang's sorrowful eyes anymore, this pitiful child... why was he oh so unlucky?

Qi Long rubbed his chin, and said to Luo Lang with a serious look on his face, "Luo Lang, don't do any more bad things from now on."

Luo Lang was taken aback by these words, unsure what Qi Long meant.

Qi Long donned a look that said 'this child is unteachable', and shook his head saying, "Didn't Boss say this before? Too many evils done will damage your RP ²."

"Qi Long, I'm going to kill you." Only then did Luo Lang figure out that Qi Long was messing with him. He leapt up and lunged at Qi Long. Qi Long saw Luo Lang coming at him, and perked up joyfully. And so the two of them started throwing punches and kicks in a noisy clatter, completely ignoring everyone else around them, not at all bothered at being the centre of attention.

Oh, these two insensitive children... Ling Lan rolled her eyes dramatically, and dodged to one side with Han Jijyun. The two of them tacitly started whispering to one another, pretending as if they were just members of the audience.

Yup, they would definitely, definitely never admit that they knew those two big idiots who had absolutely no concept of upholding appearances.

Qi Long and Luo Lang's fierce battle drew the attention of everyone in the combat hall. Among them, two instructors, who had initially had a trace of boredom and impatience on their faces, became much more energetic when they saw Qi Long and Luo Lang's spirited exchange of blows as they fought.

"Not bad, not bad, the old dean really didn't lie to us. The little brats from this year's first grade really do have some chops," said one of the instructors, chuckling.

The other person remained stern, observing intently as Qi Long and Luo Lang continued to exchange moves, before responding, "Hn, the foundations of these two brats are pretty good."

Qi Long and Luo Lang had trailed Ling Lan for this half a year; though it was hard to say if there was any improvement in other aspects, their foundations in combat were definitely much sounder than they had been at the start of the school year. This was because the learning space had always emphasized that the basics were the most important — Ling Lan naturally brought this principle to Qi Long and the others during their regular practice sessions.

After watching for a moment, the grinning instructor suddenly sighed. "Tai, don't you find this scene familiar?"

The serious-faced instructor looked at the other, uncomprehending.

"Thinking back, when I met you, it was also at the scout academy. Back then, we also fought like this." The smiling instructor's face was filled with nostalgia.

Hearing this, the stern instructor couldn't help but huff mockingly, and say, "The silly grin you had on your face all day back then annoyed me whenever I saw it." That said, he side-eyed his good friend coldly, and continued, "Your face right now is still like that, still annoying."

"Dammit, well, aren't you still wearing that coffin-face of yours around scaring people?" The smiley instructor became disgruntled. Still, even so, his face continued to bear a smile — looks like he was naturally born with a smiling face.

"Want a fight?" Coffin-face stared narrowly at Smiley-face, fighting spirit thick in his eyes.

Smiley-face blinked in realisation, and said sullenly, "F*ck, almost fell for your plot. I'm not going to fight you — so troublesome." How had he forgotten that his friend was a natural battle freak? His hands would itch if he didn't get to fight at all in a day. Moreover, whenever he actually fought, if he didn't fight till both the skies and the land were dark, and till both his body and energy were exhausted, he wouldn't stop. Nope, he wasn't going to inflict this self-torture on himself.

Coffin-face saw that his taunts weren't going to work, and his face was full of regret. This year, it was the turn of their batch of operators to teach at the scout academy for one year. Having just left the battlefield, they were still really unused to this sort of civilian lifestyle — they naturally belonged to the battlefield.

"Which child do you favour?" asked Smiley-face, brimming with curiosity.

"That one with the crew cut." Coffin-face was referring to Qi Long.

"Yep, the crew cut brat should have the better strength. However, that pretty boy's physical characteristics are really not bad, a real trainable talent." Smiley-face seemed to like Luo Lang better.

Hearing Smiley-face's words, Coffin-face's already stern face became even sterner. He peered intently at Smiley-face and said, "You want to take him on as a student? An initiate? Have you thought it through?"

The military world really placed a lot of importance on the master-disciple relationship. Regardless of whether it's taking on an 'initiate disciple' or the final 'true disciple', once their relationship was confirmed, they wouldn't be able to get away from this connection for the rest of their lives. For instance, if Smiley-face wanted to take on Luo Lang, even just as an initiate disciple, it would be equivalent to Smiley-face acknowledging Luo Lang as a disciple of his branch. From then on, Luo Lang would receive the protection and cultivation of Smiley-face's branch — in other words, whether Luo Lang was good or bad in the future, Smiley-face would have a hand in it.

"Yeah, just as an initiate disciple though." Smiley-face continued smiling widely, utterly unconcerned.

"Precisely because it's just as an initiate disciple, that's why I need you to be more serious about it." Coffin-face was a little angry now. If Smiley-face was taking the boy on as a true disciple, then he would have nothing to worry about, because in that case,

both the instructor and the disciple would already be grasshoppers tied together on the same string — both would have to be equally responsible, and that relationship would be akin to that of a father and son.

But an initiate disciple was different. That relationship did not require anything from the student, but had requirements for the instructor. In other words, taking on an initiate disciple meant a unidirectional relationship where the instructor provided painstaking care and effort. If the initiate disciple decided not to become the instructor's true disciple in the end, all the invested effort of the instructor previously would be wasted with no avenue for recourse, because all of it was out of the instructor's self-will.

"It's rare to find one that I like. It's worth it to take a little risk." Smiley-face seemed to have made up his mind.

Coffin-face knew that once his good friend made a decision, he would not change his mind. He could only sigh to himself, and said nothing more.

"Angry?" asked Smiley-face, prodding at Coffin-face's shoulder. Smiley-face felt that his willfulness may have been a little disrespectful in the face of his good friend's concern, so he couldn't help but seek reassurance.

"No. I've just made a decision," said Coffin-face placidly.

"What decision?" Smiley-face was very curious.

Coffin-face peered at Smiley-face for a moment, then said, "I have decided to take on that crew cut boy as my initiate disciple."

Chapter 82

Ling Lan vs Qin Yi

"Ah..." Smiley-face finally could not maintain his smile any longer — the shock was clear on his face — but he very quickly collected his wits, and said exasperatedly, "Have you gone mad? This is an initiate disciple we're talking about, *initiate* — if the elders in your family find out, you'll be in deep sh*t."

"I'm optimistic about that crew cut boy's future." Coffin-face's expression was very calm, as if telling Smiley-face that he was worrying for nothing. "Besides, didn't you say those two brats are just like we used to be?"

He was still the one who understood Smiley-face the most. Qi Long and Luo Lang's fight had reminded Smiley-face of when they had first met, bringing up feelings of nostalgia. On top of that, in terms of both looks and character, Luo Lang closely resembled Smiley-face, which was why Smiley-face had been moved to take Luo Lang on as an initiate disciple. Of course, another reason was that Luo Lang's personal qualities were also very exceptional — otherwise, no matter how similar they were, without any cultivation value, the thought of taking him on would never have crossed Smiley-face's mind.

Coffin-face's words left Smiley-face unable to continue to try and dissuade him. Smiley-face's lips flapped soundlessly for a moment, but he finally settled on saying, "Perhaps they can inherit our dreams."

"I hope so." Coffin-face looked towards Qi Long's direction, and when Smiley-face wasn't looking, a subtle smile silently appeared on his lips, instantly gentling Coffin-face's typically austere look considerably.

The arena matches for the advancement of the top 13 into the top 7 were all held simultaneously, so after Ling Lan and the other two of her group exchanged encouragements, they all went to their respective stages.

The matches officially began, and most of the crowd had gathered around the stage

where the Ling Lan vs Qin Yi match was being held. Some of the Class-A students who had already been eliminated came personally to the combat hall just to watch this match.

Of course, the feelings of the Class-A students were complicated, unsure whether they wanted Ling Lan to continue her one-move advancement streak or wished for someone to break it so that Ling Lan would return from that untouchable distance to a more manageable distance before them.

However, regardless of what the students thought, Ling Lan and Qin Yi appeared to be extremely calm. When the referee called out the start of the match, Qin Yi first dashed to one side of the stage, while Ling Lan remained standing in the middle of the arena, facing the other from a distance.

Just like that, the two of them froze. Time slipped by slowly — an unknown number of minutes passed — and the audience themselves couldn't help but become impatient.

At then, one of the two finally moved.

Ling Lan was the one who moved. Not because her patience was worse than Qin Yi's, but because she felt that continuing to wait like this was just a waste of time. Qin Yi's stance was defensive, so it was obvious that he didn't intend to strike first.

Qin Yi had taken such an approach because after studying Ling Lan's previous battles, he had found that those students who had been defeated in one move by Ling Lan had all attacked first. Although he didn't know if defending and counter-attacking would be effective, Qin Yi was hopeful. He settled on the strategy of waiting for Ling Lan to attack first.

Qin Yi still had confidence in himself. He believed that if he put his full attention on tracking the opponent's movements, he should be able to see the other's attacking style, and perhaps would be able to stop the opponent's attack.

Ling Lan knew what her opponent was thinking, and so decided not to waste any time; this time, she initiated the attack.

Ling Lan charged forward, her right hand forming a fist and striking out at Qin Yi. Her punch actually emitted a loud explosion of air — you could just see how terrifying its speed and power was.

This time, the teacher in charge of refereeing their match was no longer the one from Ling Lan's previous matches. However, when he saw this attack of Ling Lan's, his gaze revealed a trace of astonishment. This astonishment was not due to Ling Lan's speed or strength, but rather due to the move itself.

Ling Lan's consecutive advancements with just one move had piqued the curiosity of many teachers, who had then gone on to observe the recordings of Ling Lan's fights. This teacher referee was one of them, and Ling Lan's current attack move had been recognised by him.

This was an attack move of Ling Lan's first opponent in the ranking battles. Of course, when Ling Lan executed it, the attack speed and strength was much faster and much fiercer, and at the same time, the opening that appeared when she swung her fist was subtly fixed by crossing her left hand over her chest in preparation for a counter. In other words, the opening was no longer an opening, but a hidden trap.

This was the result of Ling Lan and Little Four's research. Ling Lan had lacked proper moves suited for arena-style fighting, which had given her no choice but to appropriate moves from the other students. Finally, she had managed to synthesize around ten moves from her research, and this was the first time she was using any of them in battle.

In contrast to the students' bewilderment, the experienced teacher had been able to tell the origins of this move with one look. This was the reason behind the astonishment in the teacher's eyes.

Qin Yi saw Ling Lan charging at him, and he reacted nimbly, dodging with a quick turn of his body. Ling Lan's attack missed, and before she could follow up with a second attack, Qin Yi had once again dashed away with a few quick steps, putting a distance of roughly 7 to 8 metres between him and Ling Lan.

"Wow, he's being really cautious. But Boss, why did you decrease your speed and strength by 70%? If you had just attacked with your normal speed, he would never have been able to dodge." The watching Little Four was very puzzled. It was obvious that one move would have been enough — why had Boss held back?

"No matter what, I must drag the fight till about 10 moves. I don't want to see the teacher's resentful eyes anymore." Ling Lan was truly afraid of that and had decided to first take it easy for a bit.

Last night, she had trained in the learning space for the entire night — which had been prolonged to a duration of two months — and had finally settled that problematic after-effect of hers. Adding up all the time spent before and after, she had spent almost half a year's time (in the learning space) to eradicate the problem. This was why Ling Lan could control her own speed and strength today, otherwise, even if Ling Lan planned to take it easy she would have been unable to.

Getting his answer, Little Four said nothing more. He still remembered Ling Lan's warning to not make noise and disturb her unnecessarily when she was fighting. If the opponent hadn't dodged far away, and Ling Lan hadn't stopped pushing her attack, Little Four wouldn't have voiced his question.

Ling Lan saw that Qin Yi had prepared himself once more, so she charged forwards again, and the moment she got within range, she threw out a side kick. In order to successfully drag out the fight to over 10 moves, Ling Lan had no choice but to be a bit careful, and pay close attention to Qin Yi's condition. She didn't wish to pull back her strength and speed only for the opponent to be defeated anyway because he wasn't prepared to take her attack. That would undoubtedly be an extremely tragic thing.

Of course, the teacher who had studied Ling Lan before could tell that this side kick was also an attack move of one of Ling Lan's previous opponents. However, Ling Lan had simplified this side kick. It no longer had the initial preparatory spin to accumulate strength.

Although that sort of strength-accumulation method could indeed increase this side kick's power by 30%, this one spin not only decreased the attack speed, but also created a large weak point. During the spin, there would be a moment when one's back would be to the opponent — if the opponent grabbed hold of this opportunity, not only could they easily break this move, but they may even counterattack to injure the user heavily instead. This was the reason why Ling Lan had been able to send the original user flying so easily in her previous match.

Thus, Ling Lan decisively discarded that one spin, choosing to throw the side kick right after a half turn. The motions had been simplified, but the strength boost was partially retained. According to Ling Lan's estimations, even though the strength accumulation was weaker, there was still a 15% boost, and if the move was handled better, even 20% was possible. As such, only 10% of bonus strength was lost, but with this little loss, a large weak point could be fixed, and the attack speed would also go up. It was undoubtedly worth it.

Perhaps this kick came too forcefully, for although Qin Yi had already been mentally prepared, he was still frightened by this ferocious kick of Ling Lan's. He abruptly realised why Ling Lan had been able to kick her opponents off the stage with one move — it was this strength, which was definitely of a horrific calibre. At that moment, Qin Yi was still oblivious that this was already the result of Ling Lan holding back 70% of her strength and speed.

Qin Yi's reaction time and speed once again proved that he was exceptional. Facing Ling Lan's powerful side kick, he again managed to evade.

At this time, the watching students began cheering for Qin Yi. Ling Lan's performance in her previous matches had been too unbelievable and aberrant, so the students couldn't help but view her as a common enemy. So, when they saw Qin Yi managing to last for two moves, they all started voicing out their encouragement, hoping that he would end Ling Lan's legendary winning streak.

Under the students cheers, Qin Yi's initially tense spirits relaxed. He felt that his initial strategy wasn't wrong. Ling Lan must definitely be someone who was good at finding his opponent's weaknesses; he had been able to catch hold of his opponents' weaknesses when they attacked first in his previous matches, which was why he had been able to defeat them in one move. However, when Ling Lan was the attacker, the roles were switched around, so Ling Lan was no longer as invincible as they had thought him to be.

Very quickly, Ling Lan had launched several more consecutive attacks. If Qi Long, Luo Lang, and Han Jijyun had been here, they may have been shocked and puzzled, because these few moves of Ling Lan would have been both familiar yet strange to them at the same time. That's right, these moves had all been appropriated by Ling Lan when she had fought them. However, these moves, under the combined study of Little Four and herself, had undergone a certain degree of modification. This is not to say that Qi Long's and the others' moves had any problems, but Ling Lan had modified these moves to better suit her own physical capabilities.

"Ah, Boss, it's the 10th move now." Little Four wasn't just a simple observer; he was seriously helping Ling Lan to count the moves being exchanged.

"Now? Finally I can let loose." Holding back her strength and her speed, as well as keeping track of the opponent's reactions — these ten moves had been extremely frustrating for Ling Lan. Hearing Little Four say that her imposed 10-move limit was

up, her mood brightened immensely.

At this time, Qin Yi had already gotten used to Ling Lan's attack speed and strength. He felt that he was able to handle Ling Lan's attacks now, and had begun thinking of ways to counterattack. After all, he would never win by purely defending. Although he was very wary of Ling Lan's strong ability in catching an opponent's weakness, he believed that even if he was caught by Ling Lan, he would be able to handle the situation with his speed and reflexes.

So, he decided to make a tentative attack, and his choice of attack was one of the moves from his family-inherited martial arts, one that was best suited for spontaneous adaptation.

"He's attacking," Little Four called out. Qin Yi's constant dodging, slippery as an eel in water, had annoyed Little Four immensely. Now, seeing the opponent finally planning to attack, he was understandably thrilled.

"An attack that isn't an attack, a defence that isn't a defence... there must be something more." Qin Yi thought that his speed was very fast and that the changes in his move were very subtle, but in Ling Lan's eyes, his speed was rather slow, and some of the changes were obvious at a glance. Moreover, her senses had already pinpointed a defensive blind spot in his move's defences.

Chapter 83

Extreme Talent!

This was Ling Lan's innate talent. When her mental focus reached a certain boundary point, a miraculous ability would emerge. Ling Lan herself wasn't sure what it was, but she felt that it was very useful. As long as she could see the opponent's move clearly, she would be able to find the opponent's weakest point.

Ling Lan may be uncertain, but Number One in the learning space knew what it was. It was precisely because of this that Number One had unsealed Number Five, with the goal of cultivating an extraordinary Ling Lan. It couldn't be helped; this innate talent was just too rare. Even in Number One's country with its highly advanced civilization, children with this innate talent were extremely limited, almost one of a kind. It was the most precious special combat talent —— Profound Insight, the perfect innate talent for mecha operators.

A notion flitted through Ling Lan's mind: to attack the weak point, or let the opponent continue his probe and see?

In the blink of an eye, Ling Lan made her decision. She decided to first take a look at the opponent's move. Ling Lan was confident — she believed that even if she gave the opponent one more move, the final outcome would not change. This wasn't blind confidence, but a belief backed up by strength.

Besides, she was really kind of curious — what would the final form of Qin Yi's move be like?

Having made her decision, Ling Lan reacted just as Qin Yi would have hoped. She balled up her right hand into a fist, and held an attack pose, meeting the opponent's attack head on.

A dark gleam flashed through Qin Yi's eyes, and with a shake of his wrist, his entire arm actually moved like a snake, twisting and turning, twining swiftly up Ling Lan's right arm to grab onto it securely.

He caught him! At that moment, Qin Yi's gaze revealed a trace of pleasant surprise, a

little shocked that he had actually managed to succeed in one move.

Qin Yi believed that as long as he managed to control Ling Lan, he had obtained the key to winning.

But was that truly the case? Qin Yi's pleasant surprise had yet to fade, and his follow up move had yet to be executed, when he suddenly felt a sharp pain at his shoulder as a large force slammed into it. At the same time, there was a sudden change in his vision. In his sight, Ling Lan suddenly became the unscalable rooftop of the colossal combat hall, and his hand that had been gripping onto Ling Lan's right arm suddenly felt as if it was holding onto a slippery eel, which slipped out of his hand in a flash...

A loud "Bam", and Qin Yi's body was roughly thrown to the floor of the combat hall. The intense pain coming from all over his body confused him — he struggled to push his upper body up, and saw Ling Lan standing high above him on the edge of the arena stage, looking down on him with a cold expression...

Looking down? Qin Yi abruptly woke up, realising that he had already fallen off the stage. In other words, he had already lost this match. According to the tournament's rules, when a fighter had been thrown out of the range of the arena, it was an immediate loss.

What in the world happened? *He* was the one who had grabbed Ling Lan, and *he* was the one who had been just about to win... then why was he the one who had been flung out of the arena in the end? This match — he was truly baffled how he had lost. Qin Yi pounded his fists against the ground in frustration, unable to accept his loss.

Seeing Qin Yi's dark mood, the teacher referee sighed softly. There had just been too much difference between Qin Yi's and Ling Lan's strength, which was why Qin Yi just couldn't understand how he had lost to Ling Lan.

However, this wasn't the time to explain things to Qin Yi. The referee declared loudly, "This match, Ling Lan wins, successfully advancing to the top 7."

Perhaps the other children had seen the match as if through fog and mist, but the observing teachers had all seen very clearly. At the time when Qin Yi had successfully grabbed hold of Ling Lan's right arm, just as his hand closed around it, Ling Lan's right hand, which had initially been fisted, had opened up, and the extended fingers had

been just the right length to make contact with Qin Yi's shoulder.

Of course, this little bit of contact should not have been enough to send Qin Yi flying, but the teachers were all experienced fighters, with the experienced eyes of the strong. They saw that, in the moment when Ling Lan's fingers touched Qin Yi, his fingers had fluttered a few times. This led the teachers to quickly come to the conclusion that Ling Lan had employed some technique, something along the lines of a secondary One-Inch Punch, which had the effect of stacking strength.

However, because the teachers had not fought with Ling Lan themselves, they could not tell for certain the power of this secret technique, and so were unsure how much Ling Lan's strength had been stacked by it. Still, this force must not be small, otherwise Qin Yi would not have been so easily knocked off the stage.

Ling Lan's impressive performance made all the teachers' eyes light up; they were all nodding in approval, expressions filled with pleasant surprise. Some of them were even eager to pounce, wishing they could just take on Ling Lan as an initiate disciple right now. However, when they saw the other teachers around, who all had their sights set on Ling Lan on the stage, these teachers could only halt their steps, sighing internally. This matter wasn't going to be that simple — there were just too many competitors.

In the academy, teachers could freely choose their initiate disciples, and there was no limit to this number. Likewise, students also had the right to choose the initiate teacher they wanted, but each student could only choose one teacher. In other words, for these teachers to become Ling Lan's initiate teacher, they would have to get Ling Lan to choose them willingly, and this was undoubtedly going to be very difficult. All of the teachers within the academy had their own advantages, so no one knew who Ling Lan would pick.

Leaving Qin Yi's gloom aside, Ling Lan had left the stage immediately after hearing the referee teacher's announcement. Qin Yi's move had sparked her curiosity — she had never expected someone's arm to be able to twist into the shape of a fried dough twist. It looked like her previous foundational physical skills training had already pushed the limits of human flexibility, but at least it had still been within the realm of possibility for humans. It wasn't like what Qin Yi just did... seeing his arm twine around her arm like a snake, Ling Lan had felt an ache in her teeth, involuntarily

drawing in a cold breath.

Goddammit, she just hated those kind of legless creepy crawly creatures. Even though she had touched, killed, and even eaten quite a few, hate was hate — this deeply rooted mentality wasn't something that could be swept away just by killing them.

Ling Lan hadn't stepped off the stage for long when the Class-A 2nd-place Wu Jiong also came off his stage. His opponent had been the weakest of the group, the original 14th-rank of Class-A.

Wu Jiong's strength was clearly much stronger than the other by a significant margin, and on top of that, Wu Jiong was an extraordinarily quick attacker. Once his opponent had been drawn into his rhythm, the opponent had been unable to keep up and had missed blocking one of Wu Jiong's punches in the end. With that, he had been sent flying out of the arena and declared defeated. Though Wu Jiong had only been slightly behind Ling Lan in getting off the stage, because the rally of attacks had been unusually quick, over 40 moves had already passed in his match.

Subsequently, several more students got off their respective stages one after another. Qi Long was the fourth person of the first grade Class-A to advance into the top 7. Seeing Qi Long's animated expression, Ling Lan just knew that Qi Long must have had a great time in his fight, otherwise he wouldn't be looking so satisfied.

"Fighting an opponent with a similar style, how was it?" Ling Lan couldn't help but ask curiously.

Qi Long's mouth split open in a wide smile. "It was beyond awesome! If I get bored in future, I'll go find that punk for a fight." His match had truly been a passionate and energetic one, exceptionally lively, allowing Qi Long to fully release all the pent up energy within his body.

Hearing this, Ling Lan mentally spared a moment of grief for Xu Zhizhi. Being fixated on by this battle maniac, it could be foreseen that Xu Zhizhi's coming days would be filled with tragic beatings.

"You... don't go overboard," said Ling Lan weakly. Since they were lucky enough to be classmates, she had to try and salvage a bit of Xu Zhizhi's future.

"Relax, Boss, I'll watch myself. I won't injure him." Qi Long sent a mournful look at Ling Lan, and added, "If Boss was willing to fight with me, then I wouldn't have to go look

for him. Fighting with you, Boss, is still more exciting."

Every time he sparred with Ling Lan, although he was always the one being pummelled, he would always feel that he had gotten a bit stronger after it. So, he sincerely wished to fight Ling Lan more, but unfortunately, Ling Lan had refused to fight for a long while previously, greatly depressing him.

Hearing Qi Long's words, Ling Lan shuddered violently, and replied immediately, "Xu Zhizhi's skills are pretty good, he's a good opponent. Qi Long, you have good taste." Better you than me, Xu Zhizhi — sacrifice yourself as tribute! Ling Lan resolutely cast aside the little remaining sympathy she had for her classmate into the far reaches of outer space.

Hells, if Qi Long really fixated on her instead, she would have to really spend all day and night embroiled in the world of combat. That would truly be unbearable.

Ling Lan's words made Qi Long nod affirmatively. He too believed that his choice wasn't bad — for him, who liked to fight, being pummelled by Ling Lan was unavoidable, and when fighting with Luo Lang and Han Jiyun, he found himself unable to truly let himself go, so fighting them was unsatisfying. Now that he had found Xu Zhizhi who fought with the same blunt and wild style as he did, he could fight without worry, so his mood was extraordinarily good.

Qi Long had already thought it through early on — if Boss Lan was free, then he would look for Boss Lan to fight (torment himself), but if Boss Lan wasn't free, then he would seek out Xu Zhizhi to fight (torment the other), and when Xu Zhizhi ran out of energy, he would go fight with Luo Lang and Han Jiyun...

There was no helping it. Qi Long's stamina was truly so good that it was abnormal, which was why he had no choice but to keep fighting to expend all that excess energy.

"There isn't any problem with your stamina right now, right?" Ling Lan was a little worried that Qi Long might have gone overboard in his glee at finding new prey.

When Qi Long heard this, he hurriedly shook his head. He would never make such a mistake. He gave his arms several forceful shakes, showing Ling Lan that his energy was still abundant.

Although Qi Long looked as if he was all brawn with little brain, he definitely wasn't a reckless person, but was more the type who seemed foolish in his great wisdom. He

had a clear bottom-line in his heart, knowing that play was play, but there was a limit to that. Advancing from the top 13 into the top 7 was not the end point; the following top 7 to top 4 advancement matches were directly after. If he really fooled around too much and used up most of his energy, if he then happened to lose, even if he could forgive himself, he believed that his boss Ling Lan would never let it go, and would definitely kill him personally.

After half a year of interaction, Qi Long knew very well what Ling Lan's creed was. Ling Lan only upheld one principle — a battle that could be won should never be lost. If victory was uncertain, then efforts should be made to win; if loss was certain, then avoid if possible, if it was unavoidable... then create all the conditions necessary to win and win it.

In other words, Ling Lan was someone who hated, abhorred, *loathed* failing. This was a compulsion that Ling Lan had brought with her from her previous life, because back then, failure for Ling Lan would be at the cost of her life, so Ling Lan could not afford to lose.

Therefore, Qi Long, as Ling Lan's follower, couldn't speak of losing so easily. Qi Long just couldn't drop the ball at this critical juncture, unless he no longer wanted to call Ling Lan Boss...

Chapter 84

The Top 4 Emerges!

For the advancement of the top 13 to the top 7, the final match to end was Luo Lang and Ye Xu's. The two of them were equally matched, and a winner had only been determined right at the very end when they had both been utterly worn out. Ye Xu had collapsed a second later than Luo Lang, and thus gained the victory, successfully advancing.

Han Jijyun and the others felt sorry for Luo Lang. If Luo Lang hadn't had to expend so much energy yesterday, causing fatigue to remain in his body which held him back today, then perhaps the result would be different. But regardless, Luo Lang's match was officially over.

However, Luo Lang's defeat didn't lower his standing in the eyes of the Class-A students, because in this match, he had proven that his strength was roughly equivalent with that of Ye Xu's. In other words, Luo Lang's strength was on par with the Class-A top 3 ranks.

The gazes of all the Class-A students were now gathered upon Ling Lan and Qi Long. If Luo Lang's strength was already on par with the top 3 of Class-A, then how strong were Ling Lan and Qi Long really? It should be known that Luo Lang was considered the weakest among the three of them.

However, they believed that as the matches progressed, Ling Lan's and Qi Long's true strength will be displayed before them. Then, they would be able to know once and for all just how much depth there really was to Ling Lan and Qi Long.

In short order, about half an hour later, the advancement battles for the top 7 into top 4 began. Although Ye Xu really hoped he would get a bye once so that he would be able to have more time to recover his strength, unfortunately, the academy did not wish for Ye Xu to be that lucky. The bye for this round was given to Qi Long.

When the name list for the assignment of byes came out, Ling Lan could pretty much

confirm the academy's bye-allocation strategy. They had chosen the strongest few — in other words, the academy was intentionally precluding the element of luck in this.

For the top 7 to top 4 battles, due to Qi Long's bye, there were only three matches. Ling Lan's luck was not much weaker than Qi Long's, actually being matched up with the already worn out Ye Xu who no longer had the ability to put up a good fight. Meanwhile, Li Yingjie had been matched with the original rank-5 of Class-A, Jiang Yuan, while Wu Jiong had been paired with the 4th-rank, Zhou Jirong — both matches a meeting of the strong.

The moment Ye Xu saw the match-up name list, his face fell. His opponent was actually going to be that Ling Lan — this luck of his was just too terrible.

Originally, he had thought of at least trying to fight, but against such an opponent like Ling Lan, he wasn't sure he could win even if he had been full of strength, let alone in this current dire situation... Ye Xu had no choice but to consider the other ranking battles he would have to fight if he lost. It should be noted that the ranking battles to determine the rankings of 13th-8th and 7th-5th would be held at the same time — if he used up the rest of his strength here, it was very likely that he might not even be able to hold onto 5th place.

It had to be said that the stronger the child, the stronger their judgment and acceptance. Knowing when to give up was also a form of courage.

The moment the referee teacher on stage said start, Ye Xu, who had already thought things through, resolutely raised his hand to surrender. So, just like that, Ling Lan once again advanced easily, successfully becoming the quickest to advance among the three people, excluding Qi Long's advancement via the bye.

Meanwhile, Li Yingjie's and Wu Jiong's respective matches were both very intense. Although Li Yingjie and Wu Jiong were the top 2 of Class-A, their strength was not yet at the level where they would suppress all opposition, being just a little stronger than their opponents. As such, it was really hard to say who would win in the end, for of course the opponents also had their eye on advancing, and had drawn up their full strength to fight it out with their opponent.

However, the two of them proved to have substantial roots in the end. Li Yingjie was the direct descendant of the top elite family of the Federation — all the combat arts he learned had been through the tests of time, with only the best foundational arts

being kept, and as such he had a head start over other people. Meanwhile, Wu Jiong was also the descendant of a fourth-generation military family — a set of military combat arts was enough for him to dominate over most of the other kids. In the end, the two of them relied on their solid foundations to defeat their opponents and advanced successfully into the top 4.

The advancement of these four students was accepted full-heartedly by the Class-A students, with no objections whatsoever.

The morning's battles didn't end there; following right on its heels were the 13th-8th and 7th-5th place final ranking battles. This time, Ye Xu's luck returned, receiving the only bye slot for the 7th-5th place ranking fights. This gave him the time to continue resting in the recovery pod, taking advantage of every second to recover his energy.

Luo Lang's luck was also not bad. For the first round, he fought against a weaker student, gaining a hard-earned victory. Then he received a bye for the next round, and had to wait for the winner of the other group to be done so they could fight for the 8th rank. Of course, he also took the chance to rest in a recovery pod to regain his strength. In the end, having recovered enough energy, both Ye Xu and Luo Lang defeated their respective opponents. And so, Luo Lang obtained 8th place, while Ye Xu obtained 5th place.

On the rankings, Ye Xu's ranking had dropped compared to when school just started, but his status was not at all lowered in the minds of the students. Ye Xu's strength was definitely exceptional — it was just that no one had expected two aberrant oddballs such as Ling Lan and Qi Long to appear in Class-A. Qi Long was more the oddball, while Ling Lan was more the aberrant.

Meanwhile, Luo Lang's rank had risen considerably, obtaining the 8th position. Everyone felt that it was well-deserved, with some students even thinking that Luo Lang's true rank should be one or two ranks higher. After all, he and Ye Xu had been neck and neck during their battle, so it would be reasonable for him to be the 6th rank. However, there wasn't much difference in strength among the top 10 of Class-A anyway, so there was no need to be too caught up in the details of the rankings.

Finally, only the exact ranking of the top 4 was left unsettled. What were the final match-ups going to be? However, the semi-finals and the finals had been scheduled for the afternoon, so the Class-A students could only suppress their curiosity, and go have their lunch at the canteen first.

While eating, Han Jijyun voiced his concern over the possibility of Ling Lan going up against Qi Long, but Qi Long wasn't worried about it at all. Rather, he was excited at the prospect, thinking that that would be the perfect opportunity for him to fight all out with Boss Lan.

Hearing this, although her expression retained its usual calm, Ling Lan prayed in her heart for the academy's A.I. to be wise, and assign the troublesome Qi Long to be someone else's responsibility.

Talking and laughing, the few of them finished their lunch, and then went back together to the combat hall, to wait for the notification of the final match-ups.

The time finally arrived, and the battle name list was revealed. Seeing it, Han Jijyun and Luo Lang leapt up in excitement, while Wu Jiong frowned slightly, his expression turning grim.

That's right, his opponent for the coming match was the one he feared the most — Ling Lan. If possible, he really had not wanted to meet him during the semi-finals, hoping that he would be able to advance to the finals in his best condition.

However, Wu Jiong quickly regained his equilibrium. As a descendant of a military family, he wasn't one to shy away from tough challenges. Wu Jiong was actually very prepared. Ever since Ling Lan had first advanced in one move, he had already been paying attention to him, considering Ling Lan as his greatest rival within Class-A.

Indeed, in Wu Jiong's eyes, that arrogant punk Li Yingjie was not worthy of being his rival. Although Li Yingjie was a match for him now, he believed that in three to five years time, he would definitely leave Li Yingjie in the dust as one of his stepping stones.

From Wu Jiong's observations, he found that Ling Lan's current strength was certainly one level higher than them, so it would be extremely difficult to defeat him. Still, he wouldn't give up just because of this. He had contacted his father, detailing Ling Lan's combat movements to him, in hopes that his father would be able to provide some guidance.

It wasn't that Wu Jiong didn't want to let his father see a recording of Ling Lan's fights, but unfortunately, the Central Scout Academy kept a very strict guard on the videos of their students. It was impossible to send out the data from within the school — the moment one left the school grounds, any data saved within any communicators, as long as it was a video file downloaded from the school servers, would be automatically deleted via formatting, so even a top expert in A.I. would be unable to restore it.

This was one of the ways the academy protected its students, forbidding video images of its students from being leaked to the outside world, though of course verbal descriptions were not included under this coverage.

After Wu Jiong's father had heard his descriptions, he had waited a beat before telling him to just hold on and wait for an opportunity. If he could hold on till after the opponent's tenth move, then perhaps he would be able to find a way to win.

The greatest reason for this was just that Ling Lan made too few moves, so there was no way to see where his weaknesses lay. Wu Jiong had naturally taken his father's words to heart, and based on the top 13 to top 7 advancement match, his father's words were proven to be accurate.

Qin Yi had just been a little too impatient, moving recklessly before he had figured out Ling Lan's true strength. Wu Jiong mentally warned himself to be patient — no matter how fierce Ling Lan's attacks were, even if there were many openings, if he wasn't sure of success, he should just continue to hold back.

Very quickly, the two matches officially kicked off. After some hesitation, Han Jijyun had decided to go watch Qi Long and Li Yingjie's battle. Meanwhile, Luo Lang had chosen to go watch Ling Lan's fight, because he wanted to see Ling Lan's true combat skills.

Speaking of which, it was rather sad that after following Ling Lan for half a year and fighting him several times during that time, they had still never seen Ling Lan use any proper systematic combat arts. Because, when Ling Lan fought with them, he basically didn't use any formal moves at all. He only attacked based on instinct with direct moves, clear to see and understand.

Precisely because of this point, Han Jijyun and the others had never been able to pin

down Ling Lan's true background. Although Han Jijyun had tried beating around the bush, Ling Lan had just smiled but kept silent. Was there really a secret behind it all, or was there really no secret at all? They just had no way to know.

If Ling Lan had known that Qi Long and the others were so concerned about her background, she would probably laugh her head off. At this moment, Ling Lan still wasn't clear about her father's true status in this world, thinking that she was just an ordinary inconspicuous descendant of a small elite family — a child with a widowed mother who had broken ties with the small elite family at that.

It had to be said that Ling Lan was a little careless in this respect. Of course, Little Four was also partly to blame here, never reminding Ling Lan to go learn more about Ling Xiao, so Ling Lan only knew that her father was an unremarkable major general in some random regiment (the Federation had so many major generals they were like hairs on the backs of cows), who had then carelessly gotten a GAME OVER when he went off to fight on the battlefield.

The matches finally started, and Wu Jiong chose to do the same as Qin Yi, dodging to one side, and putting up a cautious defence. This caused Ling Lan's head to ache.

Meanwhile, on Qi Long's side, the fight was intense from the very beginning. Qi Long had always been a child who fought based on personal instinct, so when he heard the referee teacher say start, he charged forwards immediately...

Chapter 85

Qi Long vs Li Yingjie

Initially, Li Yingjie had wanted to launch a test attack once to probe Qi Long's depths, but the thought had barely crossed his mind when the other's right fist had appeared unexpectedly before his eyes. It was coming at him fast and furious, the wind blasted towards him by the punch causing a mild ache in his cheeks.

Li Yingjie reacted quickly. He leaned backwards to put as much distance as he could between the two of them, and crossed his arms in front of him to block the punch...

A soft "bam!" — the sound of a fist striking flesh. Li Yingjie was sent stumbling back three steps before the force behind Qi Long's punch dissipated. But with this retreat, he had lost the initiative.

Taking advantage of the opponent's inability to attack, Qi Long rained a heavy barrage of combo attacks on Li Yingjie. This was Qi Long's favoured style of attack to begin with, so he was truly fighting just as he liked. In the few advancement matches at the beginning, his opponents had all been thoroughly defeated by these wild attacks of Qi Long. Mind you, it wasn't easy for opponents who were slow to rev up and get their head into the game to get used to Qi Long's unreasonable attacks.

Qi Long's fierce attacks in this match led all the watching teachers to nod repeatedly in approval, all of them thinking that he was good at timing his attacks, and had good instincts — a true natural-born fighter.

When Coffin-face, who was intently watching Qi Long fight from the side, saw this, his expression became heavy, as if thinking of something.

Seeing this, Smiley-face couldn't hold back his curiosity. "You noticed something?"

"Just keep watching, if it really is what I think it is... Yun Ye, maybe, I've hit the jackpot." Coffin-face's eyes, which were originally as calm as still water, were actually shining with an unusual light; it was clear to see just how turbulent his emotions were.

Smiley-face understood his good friend very well, and knew that his friend would not

talk about things he wasn't sure of, and so he did not continue to question, but instead turned to put his full attention on watching Qi Long and Li Yingjie's match. Perhaps he would be able to see something, for Smiley-face knew very well who his good friend was excited about.

Although Li Yingjie was so cocky and arrogant that he invited dislike, it could not be denied that his abilities were really not bad and that he had really solid foundations. Even though he had been taken off guard by Qi Long's fierce attack right out of the gate, it wasn't long before he gradually managed to hold his ground. Although he was still more on the passive side, he still managed to find several opportunities to fight back. This performance of his also gained the acknowledgement of quite a number of the teachers in attendance.

Of course, this was not to say that Li Yingjie had turned the tables around and was fighting Qi Long on even ground. Truth was that Qi Long still had the advantage; it was pretty much impossible for Li Yingjie to wrest control back within 100 moves.

Li Yingjie also understood that this situation was bad for him, and as this was also the first time he was disadvantaged in a fight, he couldn't help but become a little anxious and impatient. Since he had first entered the Central Scout Academy, his father had already told him that the first ranking tournament was very important. Its importance did not lie in the treatment one would receive after having their ranking confirmed, but rather in its function as a test to highlight the cream of the crop, so that the most exceptional students could receive the cultivation of the most exceptional instructors under the Initiate Program, which was unique to the Central Scout Academy.

However, very few children would have the chance to experience it, for the Initiate Program was extremely covert, and its education system was on a one-on-one basis — other than the children who had been selected to participate in the program, the majority of children would never get to know of its existence.

Of course, with regards to some of the older elite families, those upper-ranking individuals with power and authority, this secret was no secret at all. Thus, they would remind their children to pay special attention to the first ranking tournament, which was how Li Yingjie knew of this as well.

Frankly, the Central Scout Academy was also aware of this 'leak', so the concealment of this program was actually only targeted at the commoners. However, the academy was not at all concerned, because those children who emerged with great potential

and exceptional abilities were typically all from these elite families and high-ranking upper class. After all, these people possessed excellent genetics, so the quality of their descendants was guaranteed to a certain extent.

Although Li Yingjie was a little irritable and impatient, under the solid foundational teachings of the Li family, he still managed to hold himself back, exchanging up to 100 moves with Qi Long. He had originally thought that the situation would slowly get better, but after 100 moves, he found that his passive state in the match was still unchanged. At that moment, his heart started to become agitated, and the way he fought became more and more impatient.

Seeing this, Smiley-face lifted an eyebrow and said, "Tai, looks like the outcome is set."

Coffin-face nodded. "Crew cut boy's opponent's patience is lacking. This is a good chance, but whether or not he can take hold of it, still depends on what the crew cut boy's going to do." If it really was as he thought, the boy could not lose...

Li Yingjie decided that he could not afford to continue dragging things out with Qi Long — he needed to regain the initiative and quickly end this match and advance. Only then could he get the opportunity to train under the strongest instructor.

Just by coming to that mental decision, Li Yingjie's entire aura changed. His initial bit of impatience disappeared in a split second and a cold air started emanating from his entire body.

The students in the audience may not have been able to sense this sort of change in aura, but the eyes of the watching teachers all turned serious. Smiley-face and Coffin-face were not excluded, especially Coffin-face, who surreptitiously prepared a Federation coin in his hand, just in case.

At this moment, Qi Long seemed to have sensed the difference in Li Yingjie, but did not stop attacking with his hands and legs, instead increasing the intensity of his attacks.

Coffin-face's eyes were coldly focused, and his expression became even grimmer. Could it be that Qi Long had sensed the danger and so was attacking with all his might?

Li Yingjie parried attack after attack as he systematically retreated one foot after another. Meanwhile, his gaze became exceptionally cool and analytical, and there was even a trace of not too subtle killing intent.

No matter how berserk Qi Long was, his attacks would always have a moment of pause, and Li Yingjie was just waiting for that moment. He wanted to defeat Qi Long in one strike, so he needed to put enough distance between them, otherwise he would be too busy handling Qi Long's relentless attacks to even unleash his trump card.

That's right, Li Yingjie was so confident because he still had a powerful trump card. His father had cautioned him not to use this trump card frivolously, because this was a killing art of the Li family, and was one of the true combat arts that had been passed down the Li family over thousands of years.

There was enough distance now — Li Yingjie finally got into the stance of the Li family's sure-kill technique...

When Coffin-face saw this, his expression changed subtly. His fingers flipped, and the coin held in his palm was now poised between his index finger and his middle finger. If Qi Long charged forwards to attack, he would immediately launch the coin to send Qi Long flying out of his opponent's attack range.

Just when everyone thought that Qi Long would continue rushing forwards to attack Li Yingjie, Qi Long did something which stunned all the spectators. As if suddenly sensing something, Qi Long, who had been preparing to attack, frowned and actually stopped moving forwards. Not only that, he also retreated swiftly, putting a considerable distance between him and Li Yingjie.

When Qi Long stopped once more, his pose had already changed from its original attack stance to a defensive stance, expression cautious, seemingly very concerned about Li Yingjie's change.

Seeing this, Coffin-face's emotionless face suddenly became animated. Retrieving the coin between his fingers to envelop it once more in his palm, he muttered to himself, "That's right, this is it, this is it."

"Tai, what exactly is *it*?" After watching for so long, Smiley-face found that he was still clueless, and so couldn't resist opening his mouth to ask again.

"Don't rush, Yun Ye, once the results are out, I'll explain." Right then, Coffin-face just had no thought to spare for explaining things to his good friend. His spirited eyes were fixed squarely on Qi Long, a deep yearning in his gaze. Initially, he had only wanted to take on Qi Long as an initiate disciple because of Smiley-face, but now, he truly wanted

to do so from the bottom of his heart.

The spectating Han Jijyun's expression also became grim — although he couldn't sense it as accurately as the instructors, he could still tell that something wasn't right with the change in Li Yingjie's aura. Along with Li Yingjie's strange pose, Han Jijyun knew that this was going to be trouble. The clever Han Jijyun deduced instantly that Li Yingjie must have brought out his deeply hidden trump card, for this somewhat fear-inducing pose had not been seen in any of his previous matches.

At that moment, Han Jijyun couldn't help but muse to himself — no wonder the top of the rankings had been monopolized by the old elite families for many years; their roots were indeed deep. It should be noted that for them, who were from middle-class families within a militaristic system, being able to learn a high-level military basic art was already considered extraordinarily lucky. But for those old elite families, they had more than one set of this sort of combat arts, and the types were varied, some even including real hereditary combat arts, such as the case of the Li family.

Just like that, Qi Long and Li Yingjie faced off, and this time, Qi Long displayed his rare patience, holding back instead of charging forwards recklessly to attack.

Li Yingjie couldn't help but swear internally — why was this Qi Long so d*mn lucky?! Right now, the stance he was holding was the Li family's strongest defensive counterattack move. As long as Qi Long launched an attack, he could instantly take advantage of the opponent's fatal weakness during his attack, and achieve a one-hit-kill effect. Unfortunately, Qi Long suddenly refused to attack...

Li Yingjie did consider that perhaps Qi Long had seen through his stance, but the moment this notion popped up, it was ruthlessly quashed by him. His father had said before that all opponents who saw the Li family death combat arts were dead — Qi Long definitely couldn't know what he was thinking.

In the end, the one who lost in terms of patience was still Li Yingjie. Li Yingjie decided not to wait any longer because this one killing move wasn't all he had; he still had many killing moves which required him to take the initiative.

So, Li Yingjie changed his stance. He rushed towards Qi Long, reaching Qi Long's side in a flash, and two fingers of his left hand headed straight for Qi Long's right arm, while his right hand splayed open vertically like a blade...

Seeing this, Qi Long was startled, and then without even thinking about it, his right fist hurtled toward the other's left fingers.

In Coffin-face's low hanging right hand, that little coin once again appeared between his fingers.

Another "bam!" of bodily impact, and two figures were sent flying in separate directions.

Then there was a loud "Ah!", which was quickly followed by two bodies violently crashing onto the ground. Both combatants had been unable to withstand the force behind the other's blow and had crashed heavily to the ground.

One of the figures smashed onto the floor of the arena stage, continued to roll over and then bounced off the edge, directly tumbling off the stage to fall below the arena.

Meanwhile, the other person smashed onto the stage as well, and actually made deep scratches on the arena floor as he slid towards the edge of the arena. Just as it looked like he would fall off the stage, that person swung out his left hand in a claw and resolutely struck out with all his might at the arena floor.

His fingers sunk into the ground with a resounding noise, but even so, score marks roughly 3 centimetres long were left on the surface of the arena floor. However, because of this force, the person managed to halt his falling body, and then with a somersault, he was once again standing firmly on the edge of the stage, clearly telling everyone that he was the winner of this match.

The referee teacher stood at the edge of the arena, glanced down at the figure lying below the stage, and then looked at the student who was already standing securely beside him. His expression was incredulous. Looks like the first grade Class-A was really going to riot.

"I declare, the winner of the advancement fight is —— Qi Long!"

Chapter 86

Sixth Sense?

Following this declaration, Li Yingjie, who was below the stage, stood up with a face full of shock as if he could not conceive that this would be the outcome.

"How — you knew that was my only weak point?" Seeing Qi Long preparing to walk off the stage, Li Yingjie couldn't help but call out. It was the greatest killing move, but it also had the greatest weakness. An average person would never choose to fight in a way where both parties would take damage, not when there were other options available, but Qi Long had chosen to attack that spot out of all spots — this was something he just could not comprehend.

Qi Long scratched his head, and thought hard for a while before replying, "I didn't know. It's just my instincts were telling me that it should be that way, and so my fist went there."

Of course, he didn't say that he had once almost lost his life under a similar move made by Ling Lan. He had asked Ling Lan then whether there was a way to break the move, and Ling Lan, guilty at accidentally injuring Qi Long just then, had deconstructed the move for him, as well as taught him that the spot which looked the strongest was most often the weakest in moves like this. In choosing to dodge it, you would fall right into the opponent's trap.

However, when fighting, Qi Long didn't have the chance to think that much. He only remembered one point — the more dangerous it was, the more he should not dodge. Thus, even as he blanked out, he decided to listen to his heart and attacked the spot it pointed out as attackable. Reality proved that his heart had not lied to him.

However, Qi Long's answer made Li Yingjie's face flush red. He felt that this answer was an excuse Qi Long had thought up because he was unwilling to tell him the real reason. At that moment, a swell of rage crested in his heart, and he hated the fact that he couldn't rip apart the hateful Qi Long before his eyes.

However, a trace of worry rose in his heart at the same time. He wondered if the Li family top-secret killing moves had been leaked — if that was really the case, it would

be a devastating blow to the Li family. Mind you, for the Li family to be so firmly rooted in the Federation, with a lineage spanning thousands of years, a large part of it could be credited to this set of highly lethal combat arts. Li Yingjie decided that once the ranking battles were over, he must immediately relay this news to his father so that he could investigate and find out who was it that had betrayed the Li family...

It wasn't just Li Yingjie who didn't believe Qi Long's words, for even the other spectators were sceptical. Of course, as Qi Long sworn brother, Han Jijyun knew that Qi Long was really speaking the truth, because he knew very well just how powerful Qi Long's animal instinct was.

There was still one more person who believed Qi Long's words — the quietly observing Coffin-face. The matter-of-fact look on his face only made Smiley-face, who was standing beside him, even more confused. He was just about to question the other, when Coffin-face suddenly tugged at his clothes, signalling for him to walk away with him.

After answering Li Yingjie, Qi Long then slowly walked off the stage towards the waiting Han Jijyun. Before he could call out a greeting, he saw two youths dressed in instructor apparel, with a clearly militaristic air about them, walking towards him from the corner of his eye, and couldn't help but stop in surprise.

The tall man with a cold expression started by saying, "You there, student. Excuse me, how should I address you?"

At this moment, several instructors who had been thinking of taking action saw the two men's approach, and abruptly stopped their steps with bitter smiles on their faces. They knew then that things were just not fated to be with that boy who was so wild in combat — they wouldn't dare to fight over an initiate disciple with those two tough customers.

Qi Long was a little puzzled, unsure why the man had come up to him, but he still answered politely, "Hello Teacher, I'm called Qi Long."

Han Jijyun sensed someone behind him and quickly turned his head around to look. When he saw who it was, his expression tightened, and he immediately bent low in a bow, saying respectfully, "Good day, Teachers."

Seeing Qi Long still standing with a bewildered face, he hurriedly nudged him,

signalling for him to follow his example.

Although Qi Long was a little lost, unsure why Han Jijyun wanted him to be so respectful to the other party, he would never go against Han Jijyun's will in small matters like this, and so Qi Long mimicked Han Jijyun and gave a respectful bow as well.

Coffin-face and Smiley-face exchanged a look, and Smiley-face took a closer look at Han Jijyun, a trace of interest in his eyes. This little fellow wasn't simple at all, actually managing to sense something within that split second...

The two men indicated for Qi Long and Han Jijyun to follow them, so Han Jijyun decisively tugged on Qi Long, pulling him along behind the teachers. Although Qi Long really wanted to go see Ling Lan's match, he still acceded to Han Jijyun's decision, and together they came to a secluded corner in the combat hall.

Smiley-face took a look around, and only after confirming that there was no one within range to hear their conversation, did he nod to Coffin-face to proceed.

"Qi Long, I would like to take you on as my initiate disciple, are you willing?" Coffin-face's expression was as frigid as usual, not at all concerned that his cold demeanour would scare away this student he had his eye on.

"Initiate disciple?!" Qi Long was at first taken aback, but then he recalled something and came to an abrupt realisation.

Seeing this, Coffin-face let out an internal breath of relief — looks like this child already knew of this secret, so he wouldn't have to waste words explaining. This sort of explaining task was what he feared the most.

Han Jijyun glanced at Qi Long with a face full of envy. About the matter of initiate disciples, his own father had already informed him about it when he had been accepted into the academy. This was also why he had been so respectful back when the teachers had approached Qi Long; he had figured it out instantly.

"Of course I'm willing." Becoming an initiate disciple was not like becoming an instructor's official disciple — there were no responsibilities associated with it on the student's end, only benefits. Of course Qi Long would not turn down this opportunity to become strong quickly which had fallen into his lap with no strings attached. Without even having to think about it, he agreed.

However, Qi Long was not someone who would forget his friends. He pulled Han Jijyun closer to his side and said, "This is my good friend, called Han Jijyun, IQ 260, definitely smarter than me. Teacher, could you also accept him as an initiate disciple?"

Hearing this, Han Jijyun's face paled dramatically and he hurried to stop him, yelling, "Qi Long!"

Many children would be disliked and discarded by a teacher because of greed, and lose the chance to become an initiate disciple in the end. Seeing Qi Long so reckless, Han Jijyun was so anxious that his forehead was beaded with sweat. In his heart, he was blaming Qi Long — why did he have to be so wilful? Didn't he know this was his chance to become strong quickly?

Seeing Han Jijyun so anxious for Qi Long, while Qi Long remained determined to obtain this privilege for his good friend, Smiley-face's smile deepened, and even the lines on Coffin-face's face gentled noticeably.

The two of them shared a glance, and then Smiley-face looked once more at Han Jijyun to say, "Han Jijyun, if you're not against it, then be my initiate disciple."

In awed surprise, Han Jijyun raised his head to say, "Can I?"

Smiley-face was all smiles as he nodded, and Han Jijyun said emotionally, "Thank you Teacher, I'm willing, I'm willing."

Seeing this result, Qi Long grinned widely in satisfaction.

But Coffin-face frowned slightly as he said, "Didn't you have your eye on the other boy?" Taking on one more disciple meant that he would have to expend double the effort — Coffin-face didn't wish for Smiley-face to become too tired.

Smiley-face remained smiling as he said, "Taking on one more is no big deal. We'll have plenty of time this coming year ahead." That said, he removed two flat and rectangular copper plates from his pocket, both of which had an orchid blossom carved on it, and handed them to Han Jijyun, saying, "One's for you, while the other is for the other initiate disciple I've got my eye on. He should also be one of your companions, hm, that boy who was fighting with Qi Long in the morning."

Hearing this, Qi Long and Han Jijyun looked at each other in pleasant surprise, and said in unison, "Luo Lang."

Smiley-face smiled and said, "Should be him."

Han Jijyun did not hesitate, immediately contacting Luo Lang through his communicator, throwing down a brief 'get here', and hanging up before Luo Lang could answer.

Luo Lang, who had been in the midst of watching Ling Lan and Wu Jiong's match, came over, utterly confused. When Smiley-face repeated his intentions to take him on as an initiate disciple, Luo Lang likewise agreed without any hesitation, directly taking one of the copper plates from Han Jijyun's hands. This was a token representing the teacher's commitment — it could not be lost.

Meanwhile, Qi Long had received a silver dollar, but the image on it was that of a pine tree, hardy and strong, tasteful in its simplicity.

Having gained satisfactory initiate disciples, Coffin-face and Smiley-face no longer had any thought of remaining in the combat hall. Bidding farewell to Qi Long and the others, they left the combat hall after arranging a time and place for training.

On the road, Smiley-face finally asked the question he had held back for so long. "Tai, what exactly does that Qi Long have to cause you to be so excited, to even bring out that token which represents an official disciple?"

"If I had the authority to accept true disciples, I'd even be willing to give a gold dollar," said Coffin-face seriously. "That boy Qi Long, if I'm not mistaken, has awakened the sixth sense."

Coffin-face's words shocked Smiley-face. "How can that be? Even we have only just touched on the edges of the sixth sense."

"Perhaps, this is an innate talent he was born with." Coffin-face could only explain it this way. The sixth sense was a miraculous ability, allowing one to sense danger and opportunity instinctually. Right now, the Federation already knew how to rely on extremely cruel torments to force trainees to gain this ability, but of course, the success rate was exceedingly low. Only those with resolute personalities who had been through countless battles could have the chance to obtain this, as they called it, ability from the realm of the gods. For instance, he and Smiley-face were part of the few lucky ones.

This was also the first time he had seen it in a child — that unpolished natural ability

was even stronger than that which they've obtained through external forces... perhaps this was their chance to cultivate an ultimate warrior for their sect.

Coffin-face had already decided that he would train Qi Long well; he would not allow such an extraordinary talent to be lost within the masses. He also considered that if he couldn't teach Qi Long well enough, then he would entrust Qi Long to his honourable teacher for mentoring.

If Instructor Number One from the learning space were here, his face would be filled with disdain upon hearing what Coffin-face had said. This was no 'sixth sense'. It was, in fact, an awakened sensory talent — proper name 'Perception', otherwise known as 'Animal Instinct' — and was one of the lower-average level talents. From this, we can see that the technology and its accompanying combat cultivation systems of the current world and the Mandora star system were light years apart, completely not of the same level.

Meanwhile, after collecting their thoughts and feelings, Qi Long, Han Jijyun, and Luo Lang hurried back to Ling Lan's combat arena to watch her match. Ling Lan's match was the complete opposite of Qi Long's, no intensity in sight. The two combatants were battling it out in terms of patience, both sides testing the other.

Ling Lan knew very well where her problem lay — killing people was no problem; even if ten more Wu Jiong appeared, she would be able to KO ¹ them easily. However, to win without harming her opponent, or even just lightly wounding her opponent, was a great challenge for Ling Lan. After all, all the moves she had mastered were ultimate killing moves; the moves that she could take out for a formal match were just too limited.

Chapter 87

A New Upset Record

Of course, Ling Lan could also choose to fight by just reacting to the opponent's moves — however the opponent chose to fight, that'd be how she'd break the move. Unfortunately, Wu Jiong was unwilling to play along with this plan of hers. In other words, Wu Jiong was determined not to take the initiative and attack but wanted Ling Lan to start attacking.

As such, Ling Lan was currently having a headache. This was also why Qi Long's side had already exchanged over a hundred moves, but here on Ling Lan's end, only ten or so tentative moves had been exchanged. In other words, a majority of the time was wasted by the two fighters just circling each other.

However, whatever Ling Lan may lack, patience wasn't one of them. Even Instructor Number One had mentioned before that Ling Lan's patience was of an abnormal level, except when she herself did not wish to tolerate something. It could be predicted that this stalemate of theirs where they continued to circle around each other would continue indefinitely. This caused many of the spectating students to lose their patience, leaving in droves, while a majority of the teachers also shifted their gazes from Ling Lan to observe the situation at some of the other arenas.

Within the mindspace, Little Four had also become increasingly agitated at the current endless circling. *"Boss, aren't you dizzy at all?"* They've already circled for around fifty to sixty circles, right?

"I'm fine. No dizziness at all." Ling Lan replied, self-mockingly. She was rather helpless to do anything about the current situation. It should be noted that during several of her attacks, she had intentionally exposed some small openings, but unfortunately, Wu Jiong's patience and self-discipline were both excellent, actually managing to resist the temptation to attack.

"Boss, just KO him directly," urged Little Four. His boss could obviously finish this with just the tip of a finger, why did she have to make things so complicated? Little Four really didn't understand what Ling Lan was worrying about.

KO directly? If only it were that easy. Ling Lan threw an angry glare at Little Four, telling him to stop making this sort of useless suggestion.

Ling Lan's distrust made Little Four very angry. His little cheeks immediately puffed up in anger, and his lips were puckered tightly in a deep pout. Huffily, he said, *"Boss, why do you need to fight at his pace? Won't you be able to hit him if you just move faster?"* Little Four knew Ling Lan's abilities very well — her attack speed could go even higher, so if she just raised it by a notch, this detestable punk before her would definitely be unable to dodge.

Ling Lan was stunned for a moment, but then started chuckling wryly. She found that she had really wedged herself into a box — why did she have to target the opponent's weakness to attack? True, she possessed the ability to see the opponent's weakness with one look, allowing her to find the opponent's fatal weakness in the moment of the other's attack to defeat them. But that's not all she possessed. She still had her own strength, speed, and reflexes that were superior to the average person's. It was entirely possible for her to rely on these other things to steamroll her opponent... this was the true display of strength.

"Little Four, you're really my good little brother. Thanks!" Ling Lan, who had resolved her dilemma, bestowed a wide smile upon Little Four, warm like the sun in winter, so warm that Little Four's little heart began pounding wildly, as he basked in this warmth that made people never want to leave.

Little Four felt as if his entire being was suffused with warmth — his puffed up little cheeks deflated, and the corner of his lips twitched upwards involuntarily.

Her problem solved, Ling Lan did not hesitate to go out at full speed, and with a quick stomp of her feet, she used the force of the spring to dash towards Wu Jiong on the opposite side. At the same time, her fisted right hand punched out fiercely at the opponent.

Wu Jiong was startled by this series of actions, but it was just a momentary lapse. He quickly raised up both his hands into a blocking stance, preparing himself to block this powerful hit of Ling Lan's.

Internally, Wu Jiong was very surprised and confused, because this attack sequence had already been used by Ling Lan at the start of the match, and he had blocked it perfectly then. An attack method that had already proven to be useless... why did Ling

Lan want to use it again?

Wu Jiong couldn't figure it out, but he very quickly found out why. The same block, the same stance, the same speed... expecting that he would be able to block it perfectly the same way, Wu Jiong was shocked to find that the fist heading straight for him suddenly — just when it was about 30 centimetres from his face — disappeared.

Yes, the fist that had clearly been right in front of his eyes a moment ago, vanished from sight just like that.

Absurdity! What in the world happened? Even as his mind struggled to comprehend what had happened, Wu Jiong knew that he was in trouble.

The thought had barely surfaced in his mind when he felt his left shoulder being struck by a heavy force. This force sent his body flying backwards uncontrollably, where he then started falling rapidly towards the ground.

"Not good, I'm hit!" The intense pain radiating from his left shoulder made Wu Jiong suck in a cold breath, however, he did not give up. Holding back the pain, he forced himself to twist in mid-air, discharging the force with a somersault to land firmly on the floor. He pressed his right hand to his left shoulder, swiftly checking on his injury.

"Okay, it's just a muscle injury!" Wu Jiong was relieved. The force behind Ling Lan's blow hadn't been too strong, just inflicting a light surface wound, which wouldn't affect him in his following fights.

However, Wu Jiong only had time to rejoice for a moment — right after he confirmed that he had only received a light wound, Ling Lan's next attack had arrived.

"This time, I must be able to see the attack!" Wu Jiong was not convinced by that last strike. He thought that his miss was because he had let down his guard a little; after all, he had managed to defend perfectly against that attack several times in the ten moves or so before it. He did not believe that he would make the same mistake again this time with his full focus engaged.

But reality stunned Wu Jiong — this time, he not only did not see Ling Lan's attack movement, even Ling Lan himself disappeared from his sight.

He saw it well — at about a distance of 3 metres away from him, Ling Lan's entire body suddenly disappeared.

Goddammit, could it be that Ling Lan could also turn invisible? Wu Jiong couldn't help but curse internally. Of course, he knew this was impossible, and the reality was that Ling Lan's speed was too fast for his eyes to keep up with. Was this really possible?

The few students who were still watching Ling Lan and Wu Jiong's match couldn't help but also yell out in shock at this time. Because, just like with Wu Jiong, Ling Lan had disappeared from their view. Of course, they could see much better — the split second after Ling Lan disappeared, he reappeared right in front of Wu Jiong, but because he was in a crouch, Wu Jiong did not see Ling Lan below him.

Qi Long was so excited that his entire body was trembling. He clutched at Han Jijyun's hand and said, "Heavens, Boss has become stronger again. This speed... it's just too goddamn cool."

Hearing this, Luo Lang could only nod vigorously beside him. Both his eyes were trained on the match, unwilling to be distracted, afraid that he would miss an even more spectacular motion.

"Become stronger again?" Han Jijyun was the only one who was doubtful. Ling Lan's performance didn't seem like he had suddenly become stronger, but was more like his strength had been unsealed.

With a "Pow!", Wu Jiong once again flew through the air with a muffled grunt.

"Ling Lan!" Everyone couldn't help but shout, for the crouching Ling Lan had directly thrown an upper kick to send the unprepared Wu Jiong straight up into the sky.

The explosive strength from the legs was much stronger than strength from the arms, and this time, Wu Jiong was hit on his right shoulder. This time, it was no longer just a surface injury — after the initial sharp pain, Wu Jiong could only feel an expanse of numbness in his right shoulder; he could not feel his entire right arm anymore.

Cold sweat broke out over his entire body. What was the condition of his right shoulder? Had his bones been shattered by the kick? Although the Federation had developed regenerative healing fluid, which could speed up the recovery process of wounds, shattered bones were not so easily fixed. An injury like that in the wrong place could affect him for life.

This kick of Ling Lan had looked fierce, but she had actually controlled her strength so that she would not cause long-lasting damage to Wu Jiong. Although she couldn't

be certain that there wouldn't be any fractures in the bones, there would definitely be no serious injury such as breaks or shattering of the bones.

"Pow! Pow! Pow!" Ling Lan's attack didn't stop there. Three consecutive meetings between fist and flesh — the airborne Ling Lan no longer gave Wu Jiong any chance of retaliating, directly striking him out of the arena perimeters to fall below the stage. Then, she landed firmly on the arena stage, gaze impassive as she waited for the referee's final declaration.

Perhaps Ling Lan's attack speed had been too quick, or perhaps Ling Lan and Wu Jiong had dithered for too long in the early stages of the fight — whatever the case, the referee teacher responsible for the match actually froze in shock for a full 30 seconds.

The scene was still and silent. No one dared to say a word in the face of Ling Lan's ferocity. His performance before and after were just too different that everyone was in disbelief. Just before, the two combatants were still circling each other endlessly, and now, within the blink of an eye, the outcome was determined? That second-rank was so easily KO-ed? Was Ling Lan just playing around all this while?

Everyone was speechless, unsure how they were supposed to face Ling Lan after this. They bemoaned in their hearts — why did such an aberrant existence like Ling Lan have to appear in their grade this year? He was so strong that they could not even imagine defeating him anymore.

The teacher suddenly woke up and hurried to declare, "This match, Ling Lan advances. Congratulations to Ling Lan for entering the finals!"

The referee teacher's declaration caused Qi Long and the other two to cheer. And then, scattered applause could be heard until the entire arena was filled with the sound of applause. Even some of the upper grade seniors watching the match were also clapping.

Ling Lan was just too strong. After a brief bout of despondency, the first grade children were all convinced by Ling Lan's strength — the ideology of 'survival of the fittest' made them acknowledge Ling Lan's supremacy.

The applause from the upper grade seniors wasn't out of acknowledgement for Ling Lan, but more in admiration of Ling Lan's success in achieving an upset. The probability for a lower-ranking student to win all this way and advance into the finals

was actually very, very low, and though it wasn't unheard of in the history of the scout academy, such occurrences were fewer than few. But this year, people were shocked. Because two people managed to achieve upsets at the same time to advance into the finals. Undoubtedly, both Ling Lan and Qi Long had established a new record, a new history, at the Central Scout Academy.

In the dean's office, two people were currently observing the match.

"Old Xu, what do you think?" Smiling, the dean pointed at the cool-faced Ling Lan left standing on the stage.

"Not bad, Ling Xiao truly has a worthy successor now." The man called Old Xu was dressed in a trim military uniform, and the stars on his shoulders and the insignia on his chest told the world that he was a lieutenant general.

Lieutenant General Xu asked pressingly, "Have you arranged an initiate teacher for the child? If you don't have a suitable candidate, I can arrange something."

Chapter 88

Ling Xiao's Legacy?

With a half-smile, the dean looked at Lieutenant General Xu. The teasing glint in his good friend's eyes caused Lieutenant General Xu's face to burn slightly, and he said embarrassedly, "Aren't I just concerned about Ling Xiao's child? So much that I've forgotten this is your territory... how could you not have made arrangements? I've worried for nothing."

"Being concerned for Ling Xiao's child is a good thing. How about this, why don't you pass me the thing that Ling Xiao left in your care?" The dean's smile was even deeper than before.

Lieutenant General Xu didn't even have to think about it, refusing immediately. "No way. The item that Ling Xiao left with me before he was deployed may very well be the secret behind his ascension to god-class operator. It belongs to the Federation, and to our military."

The dean's smile disappeared. "Ling Xiao left me a message that that item is to be left for his child. Old Xu, don't cross the line. Ling Xiao sacrificed his life for the Federation — we cannot wrong him, and wrong his child."

Lieutenant General Xu's expression turned a little ugly, and he said heavily, "That's why I've been spending so much effort to protect this child, even raising his secrecy level, and finally sending him into your care. Besides, not giving him Ling Xiao's relic is also for his own safety. The legacy of a god-class operator... is something everyone would go crazy over. That child would not be able to protect it."

"Xu Tingzhu! You godd*mn bastard!" The dean slammed his hands on the desk and stood up, no longer able to maintain his composure.

"Ye Yifan, calm down." Lieutenant General Xu glared back just as fiercely. Over this matter, every time they met, they would leave on bad terms.

"Calm down? I am already calm enough, tolerating you for six years. Right now is the time when this child needs guidance for initiation, and which instructor could be

better than a god-class operator? That is Ling Xiao's legacy!" said the dean seriously. "This is the right of Ling Xiao's son. He has the right to inherit everything of his father's."

"I did not say that I wouldn't let the child inherit. Once we have deciphered it, we will reproduce a copy for him. He will still be able to obtain everything of Ling Xiao's." Lieutenant General Xu was very angry at his old friend's misunderstanding. He wasn't planning to rob Ling Lan of his rights, but only wished that Ling Xiao's legacy could be circulated around the military, perhaps even becoming standardized. It could be imagined how impactful that would be — the Federation's combat power would certainly get a swift boost, perhaps even becoming a terrifying force powerful enough to be a deterrent for the bordering enemy nations. It should be known that Ling Xiao had been the youngest god-class operator of the Federation who had advanced the fastest.

The dean said mockingly, "It's been six years. Has your military department cracked any bit of it?"

Lieutenant General Xu was silent. After 10 seconds, he replied solemnly, "I believe that, after another few years, we will definitely be able to decode it and obtain Ling Xiao's legacy."

"Stop lying to yourself. You all have no idea what to do with that thing." Although the dean was just the dean of the Central Scout Academy, that didn't mean he was ignorant of all the news and secrets of the internal military.

Having the truth thrown into his face by his old friend, Lieutenant General Xu's expression was a little awkward.

The dean pretended not to notice Lieutenant General Xu's awkwardness and continued to say, "This proves that some activation condition must have been set on that thing by Ling Xiao. Perhaps only his successor can activate it."

Lieutenant General smiled bitterly at these words. In truth, he also knew that it was highly probable that that was the case, but he just couldn't let it go and wanted to try for a little longer. "I'm also doing this for the future of the Federation. If we could just decrypt that thing, even if it doesn't result in another god-class operator for the Federation, it could still help the Federation cultivate a countless number of high-level operators. If our luck is a bit better, even imperial operators are possible."

The dean's tone gentled. "That's why, I have given you six years. If you all had cracked it, I would make a copy for Ling Lan, and consider Ling Xiao's will done. However, you all still have not cracked it, and Ling Xiao's child has now officially entered this academy. At the start of the next six months, he will have the right to enter the virtual world and accept initiate instruction. I have to pass on Ling Xiao's relic to that child so that he is not held back."

Lieutenant General Xu was still noncommittal. "Passing it on to that child, how far can he go? None of the children of a god-class operator have been able to break past their limits to become a high-level operator. Even if we use agents to heavily cultivate them, advancement to ace operator level has already been considered a grand feat. But if the item remains with the military, once it's decrypted, there will be countless aces, even imperials! Old Ye, no matter how you look at it, it's more beneficial in my hands, just give me a little more time, alright?"

With effort, the dean held back the rage within his chest, and said, "This is all based on the assumption that you all will be able to crack it. What if you all cannot crack it within your lifetimes? Or perhaps Ling Xiao has set it so that if it's not his successor, it's impossible to obtain his legacy? Forcefully trying to crack it might trigger it to self-erase via formatting; that way, we won't be able to get anything at all. Not just that, we would also have caused Ling Xiao's child to lose out on obtaining his legacy. We cannot be that selfish."

Lieutenant General Xu was a very tenacious person. Once he had decided on something, he typically would not change his mind easily. Even if everything the dean said was true, he still didn't want to accept the dean's words.

The dean felt rather helpless. He also understood his good friend's personality — more susceptible to persuasion than coercion — so he thought of a compromise. He said, "Old Xu, let's try a different method. Since your military department hasn't been able to crack it so far, then let's put it in the virtual world of the Central Scout Academy. We can allow all the children free access to it, and let the children challenge it. Perhaps then, we might be able to obtain some unexpected rewards. You should know, the way children think is very imaginative and unrestrained, completely beyond what we adults can do.

"Also, hiding this thing among all the other open missions — I believe no one would imagine that this would be Ling Xiao's legacy. Even if Ling Xiao's child really obtains the legacy, there shouldn't be any danger."

Hiding in plain sight, was it? Lieutenant General Xu considered the plan, weighing the potential costs and benefits. Seeing that Lieutenant General Xu was a little persuaded, the dean decided to add more fuel to the fire. He patted Lieutenant General Xu's shoulder and said, "Old Xu, don't forget, these children are truly the future of the Federation. No matter who obtains Ling Xiao's legacy, our Federation will have everything to gain and nothing to lose."

Lieutenant General Xu was finally convinced, but he put forward a request, "That item has to remain under our monitoring."

This way, no matter who obtained the legacy, they would be able to receive the inheritor's information immediately, so that they would be able to seek him out to get him to divulge the contents of the legacy, giving the Federation the means to become stronger.

The dean thought for a moment, and then agreed, but suggested that before anyone managed to crack it, the monitoring staff may not have private contact with the world outside the academy. In other words, before there was any change, they would have to stay put within the academy as instructors and wash their hands of any messy and improper conduct.

Lieutenant General Xu agreed to that in turn. After all, when their monitoring staff entered the Central Scout Academy, it was only reasonable to play by their host's rules.

The two of them agreed on a time to transfer Ling Xiao's legacy, and then Lieutenant General Xu bid farewell and left.

Seeing Lieutenant General Xu get onto a mecha and leave, the dean exhaled a shallow breath, and said softly, "Ling Xiao my boy, this is all I can do. Whether or not he can obtain your legacy will be all up to your son now."

Ling Lan, who had just ended her match, could not know that in the dean's office just a few kilometres away, for the sake of her rights, two old men had gone through a spirited debate. Some parts of it were even laden with the stench of gunpowder ¹, but the dean had managed to win her the chance to obtain the legacy in the end.

Ling Lan got off the arena stage and was immediately surrounded by Qi Long and the other two. Qi Long in fact had just pounced, but was kicked away by the conservative

Ling Lan. She was still a virgin maiden, okay? How could she just let any man hug her so easily?

As Wu Jiong's injury was a little severe, he had to lie down in a recovery healing pod for a length of time, so the 3rd and 4th rank determination battle would be delayed by half an hour. Meanwhile, Ling Lan and Qi Long's match would be held after Wu Jiong and Li Yingjie's match.

Ling Lan's group of four was just about to go to the side to rest when, after taking just a few steps, Ling Lan felt that familiar tyrannical suction coming from the learning space.

D*mmmit, here we go again. Cold sweat poured from Ling Lan's forehead as she fought desperately against that suction force.

Right now, she was a little confused — why would this awareness-sucking phenomenon of the learning space appear randomly in the light of day? Previously, it had always only happened when she was about to go to bed at night.

Ling Lan knew she couldn't hold on for too long, so she tugged on Qi Long's arm and said, "Qi Long, I'm not feeling so well. Quick, help me to a recovery pod."

Due to her strong resistance against the suction, Ling Lan's face was extremely pale, causing Qi Long and the others to become very worried.

Han Jijyun indicated for Qi Long to hurry up and help Ling Lan to the recovery pods, and asked concernedly, "Boss Lan, has the acceleration you did earlier caused damage to your body?"

Ling Lan was just cracking her head trying to think of an excuse for her strange condition when Han Jijyun unexpectedly delivered up this perfect excuse to her. She nodded and said, "Yes, that acceleration movement draws on the body's energy, which is why I don't use it normally. But as long as the draw isn't too much, there isn't really a problem. I just need to lie down in a recovery pod for a while to recover."

Ling Lan's reply reassured Qi Long and the others. Qi Long abruptly thought of something most important, and quickly opened his mouth to ask, "Then, for the match with me later, can you make it in time, Boss?"

Ling Lan smiled wryly. She herself had no clue how long those few instructors within

the learning space would hold her for this time — it might just be for a few minutes, but it could also be for a day, or even for several days and nights. Unable to say for certain, Ling Lan could only say ambiguously, "This depends on how much energy I have used up this time. If it's just a bit, then I'll be fine after a few minutes, but if it's more, I may not be able to make it to the final match."

Ling Lan's words made Qi Long deflate instantly. He had really been looking forward to fighting a great match with Boss Ling Lan.

Seeing this, Ling Lan said sternly, "Qi Long, regardless of what happens, you must persevere. You must not make our grade one Class-A lose face."

Hearing this, Qi Long was taken aback, unsure what Ling Lan was talking about.

Han Jijyun understood however, and seeing Qi Long's face perplexed face, he hurried to explain, "Boss Lan means that if, in the end, you are the one to represent grade one Class-A to challenge the upper grades, you must not disgrace our Class-A."

Qi Long understood then, and he nodded solemnly to show that he understood. "Don't worry, I'm like a roachie ² that can't be killed!"

Although Qi Long wasn't sure what the 'roachie' Ling Lan had mentioned before meant, he really liked how it was described as impossible to beat to death, thinking that the description fit him very well.

Ling Lan couldn't help but laugh, though of course she kept her reason for laughing to herself. However, she hadn't laughed for long before her face paled even more. The force trying to suck Ling Lan's awareness into the learning space was gradually increasing in intensity, and Ling Lan almost didn't manage to resist it, almost fainting right then.

Seeing Ling Lan's face becoming even paler, Qi Long and the others no longer dared to talk to Ling Lan and affect him even more. Soon, they had rushed to the recovery pods which had been supplied by the combat hall for the students.

Luo Lang hurriedly opened one of the recovery pods, and Qi Long and Han Jijyun supported Ling Lan to lie down in it. Ling Lan only had enough time to say a breathy 'thanks', and then she could no longer resist the yet stronger pull and fainted on the spot.

Qi Long saw Ling Lan close his eyes and enter a deep sleep, and then they slowly closed the recovery pod. Seeing the healing fluid envelop Ling Lan, their faces were writ with worry, but for now, all they could do was watch over him. There was nothing they could do to help Ling Lan but wait for him to recover. They only hoped that this time would go by faster.

However, in the end, Ling Lan did not wake up in time, and so was absent for the final match. This was equal to a loss by forfeit.

Qi Long became the grade one Class-A 1st-rank, and also received the right to challenge the upper grade Class-A top rank. This was the cross-grade challenge tournament that all the students were excited about.

The cross-grade challenge tournament would begin tomorrow. Within the combat hall, there would be only one arena. The lowest grade would keep challenging upwards until he lost. Of course, he could also keep winning until he reached the final match, successfully claiming the peak to become the true scout academy number 1.

Still, all the children of grade one Class-A knew that Ling Lan was the true top rank, the undisputed king of grade one Class-A. On this point, even Qi Long himself had no doubts.

Chapter 89

The Mysterious Murals!

When Ling Lan, who had had her consciousness forcefully extracted, opened her eyes once more, she found that she wasn't in any particular instructor's training space, nor was she in the main hall of the learning space where Little Four was at. Instead, she was in an extremely dark and gloomy tunnel.

Ling Lan couldn't help but frown. She wasn't a stranger to tunnels in the mind-space — once, one of Instructor Number Five's twisted experiments had been held in this sort of setting. Of course, that experience definitely could not be called pleasant, so Ling Lan was not a big fan of this sort of surroundings.

Still, Ling Lan was also very clear on the fact that whether she liked it or not, she would have to stay put here. The learning space had never put anything up for negotiation.

Ling Lan waited for a good long while, but no instructor presented themselves. The furrow of her brows deepened — what exactly was going on?

"Hello, is anybody there? Instructor Number One? Instructor Number Five? Instructor Number Nine?" yelled out Ling Lan. She did not want to waste time here on this sort of endless waiting. Remember, on the outside, Qi Long was still waiting to fight a match with her, and she really didn't want to be a no-show.

The only response Ling Lan received was a gradually fading echo from the tunnel; there was no human response. After some thought, Ling Lan raised her hand to rub at her forehead and said with a helpless tone, "Little Four, stop playing, come out now."

She thought that this could be a prank by Little Four, but unfortunately, silence was still the only response Ling Lan received. And so Ling Lan was stumped. Could it be that she had guessed wrongly?

Ling Lan's brows were scrunched up tightly as her gaze swept over her surroundings in hopes of being able to find some clue — if this was a test, the learning space would definitely provide some sort of hint.

The lighting in the tunnel wasn't very good — she could only see for a distance of about 10 metres. All around her was a thick darkness, just like a black hole capable of devouring everything, so still and quiet that she felt suffocated.

Ling Lan took several slow steps forwards, and it suddenly got even darker. Ling Lan squinted her eyes, trying to get her eyes adapted quicker to the meagre light that was almost darkness. Ling Lan thought that it would be dark all along the tunnel, but unexpectedly, it got subtly brighter right in front of her as she shuffled along, and then she found that two metres ahead, on the wall on her right-hand side, there was a small platform jutting out, with a small oil lamp sitting on it. The lamp was emitting a feeble light, lighting up the area around it for several metres.

"How stingy. Couldn't they have put out a bigger one? A brighter one?" Ling Lan was a bit disgruntled. As a girl, she really hated the dark.

Ling Lan's grumbles had just faded when her face went slack in surprise. She had noticed that she was surrounded by thick darkness once again, not a trace of light visible.

"Seems like, this tunnel has a curve to it." Only that could explain why her sight could be obscured, preventing her from seeing the light of the next oil lamp.

Ling Lan continued to move forwards. When she once again entered the place where the light was the darkest, she saw something from the corner of her eye which made her let out an involuntary cry of surprise. She felt as if the wall at that section was not the same as what she saw earlier — an even flat sheet — but instead had highs and lows as if marked with something.

Could it be that the wall contained some secret? Or perhaps the information of the test? Ling Lan felt a surge of excitement. She quickly retreated back to where the oil lamp was, and with a leap through the air, she plucked down the oil lamp from its platform.

"Looks like there was a reason for setting out oil lamps that can be removed. I actually overlooked that. Luckily my sight is amazing, letting me see things that most people can't, so I didn't miss it in the end." Even as Ling Lan congratulated herself, she became even more cautious. She had sensed that the test set by the learning space this time was not easy — no instructions from the instructors, and also no hints from the system. She even suspected that, if she hadn't discovered the key point hidden on the

walls, she might very well have gone around in never-ending circles in the tunnel, until she managed to find it — or perhaps, if she never managed to find it, she would be here until she died...

Ling Lan shook her head vigorously, telling herself to stop scaring herself. She lifted the oil lamp and continued onwards with a hand on the wall. Finally, the uneven section of wall she had noticed revealed itself before her... it turned out to be a realistic lifelike mural.

Ling Lan lifted the oil lamp high, and rays of light shone over the mural to display it in its entirety before her eyes.

And then, Ling Lan felt a rush of killing intent assault her senses, making her draw in a cold breath. On the mural, corpses littered a wild plain. Their bodies were broken and battered, and on those corpses whose faces were still distinguishable, one expression was vividly portrayed —— terror, a profound terror born from extreme despair.

And in the centre of this plain piled with corpses, a person stood tall. He was looking at everything surrounding him with a smile on his face, as if in admiration, but also as if he were enjoying this lavish feast of bloody carnage before his eyes. At the same time, gripped in his hands, was the head of an infant still in its swaddling clothes. His fingers had already sunk into the infant's flesh, causing countless rivulets of fresh blood to flow down and obscure the infant's face...

Ling Lan felt a chill penetrate her heart. She could clearly sense the emotions of the ruthless killer in the image. There was no frenzy, nor was there any distortion in his rationality — instead, there was a sort of extreme calm. He was thoroughly enjoying all of this — killing people was just another game — there was no semblance of humanity within him.

Could this person still be considered human? Ling Lan held back her discomfort and continued to walk. After another 10 metres or so, another mural appeared. It was completely different from the previous one. This time, the image was packed with a horde of live people. They were prostrated on the ground, with quite a few of them looking up towards somewhere high above. Although the expressions on their slanted faces were all different, there was one point they all had in common — their eyes were all filled with a zealous reverence. And their focus was at the highest point of the mural. A human being, fashioned like a deity, was holding onto a staff, smiling

benevolently down at all of his believers at his feet.

Unsure why, Ling Lan, who should have felt warmed and calmed by this picture, again felt a chill run through her. She couldn't help but feel that that deity's smile carried a type of mockery and contempt; as if within his eyes, all he saw were a multitude of ants.

Ling Lan's brows drew even closer together. What were these murals trying to tell her? Ling Lan knew that the learning space would not give out useless images. If there was no meaning to them, the two walls of the tunnel would be smooth and unblemished, not to mention how concealed the murals were.

Ling Lan was not someone to think herself into knots. Since she couldn't figure it out now, then she would just continue moving onwards to find the answer.

Subsequently, more murals appeared one after another, bringing Ling Lan through demonic realms, fantasy dreamscapes, spiritual planes, and also bestial wildernesses... all kinds of strange and fascinating worlds presented themselves before Ling Lan one by one. Even as Ling Lan was awed and stunned by all of them, her confusion grew — what exactly were all these seemingly unrelated murals driving at?

Just like that, Ling Lan skimmed over all these murals one by one. After approximately half an hour, when the countless murals were starting to make Ling Lan's eyes cross and head spin, yet another new mural appeared.

This time, Ling Lan found her steps stopping as she exclaimed loudly in surprise because this mural was completely different from any of the others she had seen previously. It was not depicting the story of any gods or demons, but chronicled the life of a regular human being.

Indeed, it was a long mural split into six panels, and though the images on the six panels were different, they all featured the same protagonist.

In the first panel, he had a confident smile on his face, and his eyes danced with excitement. Carrying his own weapon, a bastard sword, slung over his back, he walked out of his own world. In the picture, behind the protagonist was a golden paddy field — it was harvest season, a peaceful refuge.

In the second panel, he came to a world buffeted by foul winds and bloody rain. He

saw hell on earth, as a group of bandits raped and pillaged a random village. Young and filled with a sense of righteousness, he was enraged, drawing out the bastard sword from behind his back to clash with the bandits.

The story was picked up closely in the third panel. At his back, countless youths followed his lead, lifting all kinds of weapons to fight back, finally killing every single one of the bandits. And then, since the village had already been destroyed, the survivors all willingly decided to accompany him on his travels.

In the fourth panel, the group helped many other people who needed similar help. They lifted their weapons to defend themselves and to defend others, and here, the people gathered around the protagonist had increased.

In the fifth panel, two different camps of people were warring with each other. The protagonist was standing in the middle of one of the camps, his bastard sword lifted high above him, pointed at the enemy as he shouted to attack. Countless warriors followed his lead into battle, courageously charging at the enemy.

In the final panel, he had ascended the dragon's throne which represented the right to rule. He was smiling, while the warriors who had followed him faithfully by his side had their arms raised high as they cheered. Joy and excitement were written all over their faces, for they had managed to defeat all the enemies that had threatened them, and established the utopia they had dreamed of...

"Achieving success and establishing a legacy?" Ling Lan wondered at this strange turn — after all, the previous murals had all depicted stories of spirituality, gods and demons — it was a bit hard to take this sudden lane-shift into a record of the struggles of a human. Ling Lan only paused for a moment; when she finished looking over the entire mural, she chose to continue moving forwards.

She had only taken a few steps when she abruptly stopped, and as if thinking of something, she quickly backtracked to return to that image on the first panel. In short order, she skipped to the sixth panel, and then Ling Lan's initially calm face turned grim in an instant.

"Is this image trying to tell me... about the corruption of a human heart? Gaining power, but losing one's true self in the process? Is it worth it or is it not worth it? Or perhaps there is yet some other deeper meaning?" Ling Lan's brows became even more tightly furrowed. The smile of the protagonist in the first panel was sincere and

enthusiastic, and very warm. But by the sixth panel, the same smile had already become fake and superficial, even cold.

Ling Lan stared closely at the protagonist's smile on the sixth panel, and the more she stared the more strange and unsettled she felt. Perhaps Ling Lan had stared too long, for she felt as if the smile on the protagonist's face was growing wider and wider, and at the same time, the chill emanating from the depths of his eyes seemed to become ever more palpable. It got to the point where Ling Lan could vaguely sense a surge of killing intent.

Ling Lan's heart skipped a beat — but just as she thought to jump away from the mural, she found that her body could no longer move.

F*ck! What in the world was happening? Why couldn't she move?

Right then, Ling Lan noticed that, within the mural, an odd streak of black had appeared on the protagonist's originally grey-white eyes, and was rapidly expanding to encompass the entire mural. Soon, the mural had become a terrifying vortex of swirling darkness, and unsurprisingly, the immobilised Ling Lan was directly sucked into it.

Chapter 90

Evolution Mission!

Ling Lan could only feel herself tumbling and being tugged every which way within the black vortex, and then she was swiftly sucked into a bottomless black hole. She felt as if she was travelling through the black hole — perhaps it was for only one second, or perhaps a long time had passed, like maybe an hour, or even a day.

Ling Lan's awareness became somewhat dulled and just as she was blanking out, light flashed before her eyes, and she was spat out from the black vortex.

Ling Lan felt herself falling rapidly. At this time, Ling Lan could see that she had arrived at an unknown small valley and was now hurtling down towards a small grassy hillside.

Ling Lan didn't know if this patch of grass was potentially dangerous, so she took in a deep breath, and using her developed core strength, she swept her right foot down several times, sending several strong gusts of wind flying down towards the grass. These winds thoroughly ruffled the grass below, sending the wild hares hiding within scattering in fright, with even several ground rodents among them.

The possibility of there being a hidden swamp or traps — none! The possibility of concealed venomous insects and other dangerous pests — infinitely close to zero!

In that split second, Ling Lan determined that the spot she was about to land on was safe, and so she freely allowed her body to fall. Still, she remained cautious, for Ling Lan knew that in an unknown world, there would also be unknown dangers.

After landing safely, Ling Lan carefully observed the surroundings of her landing point. Seeing that there really was no danger, only then did she take the time to take a closer look at the beautiful valley before her.

The view in the valley was breathtaking. On the distant hillsides, countless trees grew — a patch of gold here, a patch of vibrant red there, and verdant greens were everywhere. At the foot of the hills, the thick grass was interspersed with wild flowers in a variety of colours, swaying gracefully in the wind.

There was also a small brook that weaved among the flowering meadow, concealed by the surroundings in some parts while clearly displayed in others. Like this, it had a sort of bashful beauty, a somewhat elusive quality about it. But nearer to her side, the brook suddenly widened considerably, becoming a small river which was neither too deep nor too shallow, and there were even some palm-sized fish frolicking within it.

On the river bank, clusters of multi-coloured wild flowers were scattered across the ground, and as the river water flowed over cobblestones of varying hues, the beauty of the flowers entwined with the radiance of the shimmering water, the splendour of each enhancing the other. Just like that, her eyes were treated to an idyllic portrait of a fairy-tale land, giving Ling Lan the mistaken impression that she had returned to the Earth of her previous life...

Although back then she had only seen such beautiful scenery online, she still remembered how enchanting those images were.

Now, in this current world, it was already impossible to see this sort of beautiful natural scenery. The more advanced technology was, the more damage was done to the environment. Even though the Federation now had countless inhabitable planets which resembled Earth, it was impossible to find scenery as beautiful as that which had once existed on Earth.

By the brook there was also a small footpath, meandering off into the distance in two directions. This proved that this valley was not uninhabited, otherwise there would not be such a path.

Seeing this, Ling Lan was undoubtedly glad, because this meant that she would be able to find out quickly where she was, or perhaps find out what she was supposed to do next.

Although Ling Lan's entry method this time was rather strange, she had already determined that she must have entered one of the specially designated missions of the learning space. Only when she completed the mission would she be able to return once more to the great hall of the learning space, or perhaps to one of the instructors' training spaces.

In fact, Ling Lan was very suspicious. This hint-less setup, where one had to rely solely on one's own ability in a wild goose chase, was very much like something the insane Instructor Number Five would cook up. Only he would do such an irresponsible thing

— throwing her into the mission realm without any notice. If it were Number One or Number Nine, they would definitely meet up with her first to give her some guidelines.

Of course, this was all just Ling Lan's speculation and could not be confirmed. She would have to first finish this mission and return before she could find out for sure. So, the first thing Ling Lan needed to do was find out what her mission was this time, otherwise she wouldn't be able to take the next step. This was currently Ling Lan's biggest problem. It wasn't like before, when the instructors would explain the mission, or when the system would announce the parameters. This time, it was clear that she had to rely on her own investigation and judgement.

Were those murals a hint for part of the mission? For some reason, Ling Lan just could not put those murals out of her mind — there was just something about them that made her think that they were a key point, but in what way exactly, Ling Lan just could not say.

Since she couldn't glean anything from the murals right now, she would just look for some new clues in this place first.

Her mind made up, Ling Lan started moving. She first looked at the direction of the river flow, and then started walking along the footpath, heading in the direction of the source of the brook. Ling Lan really liked to start from the beginning. That way, she believed that regardless of whether she wanted to search or to solve a problem, the order would be systematic, and it wouldn't be as easy to miss anything.

Just like that, Ling Lan slowly followed the path to wind up those little slopes. She ascended step by step, and after about 30 minutes, when Ling Lan turned a corner along the footpath, she saw a large mountain in the near distance. At a glance, she could see that the path would end abruptly before that mountain.

This way should be a dead end! If she wanted to save time, Ling Lan should just turn back now, and search for clues in the other direction. Brows furrowed, Ling Lan looked towards the mountain, considering whether she should just turn back here.

"Ling Lan, you must remember, there is no such thing as 'almost' in the study of physical skills, and there are definitely no shortcuts. Through hard training, knowing means mastering everything — if not everything is mastered then it means you do not know. There are only these two categories, no other." Instructor Number Nine's clear voice suddenly rang out in Ling Lan's mind in recollection.

Back then, when she was still learning the foundational physical skills, Instructor Number Nine had asked her whether she knew them yet. Being cautious, Ling Lan had replied by saying that she 'almost' knew them.

This answer caused Instructor Number Nine to give her a good long lecture, warning her that she should make sure everything she does is really at 100% before thinking of her next step.

100% confirmation, is it? Ling Lan scratched her head and released a quiet sigh, giving up on the notion of heading back. There shouldn't be a time limit for this mission. In that case, she might as well run to the end and see. Ling Lan knew that if she didn't take the effort to make sure, she would not be at ease.

Ling Lan continued onwards towards the towering mountain, and after approximately half an hour, Ling Lan finally arrived at the base of the mountain.

This mountain had a curve to it, curving inwards and causing an oval plot of flat ground to appear before it. On the plot of land were many trees of varying heights and sizes. Some of the trees were incomparably thick, having already grown here for who knows how many centuries, perhaps even millennia.

Meanwhile, it had only taken one glance for Ling Lan's eyes to light up, because she had noticed an almost imperceptibly small path winding into the forest. This was all thanks to Number One who had previously made her stay in a primordial deep forest for several months, leading her to learn how to find those very well-hidden yet safe paths, no matter if they were created by wild beasts or herself.

The corners of Ling Lan's lips quirked up into a smile. So it was true that 100% confirmation was needed for anything, otherwise too many chances would have easily slipped by unnoticed.

With a light heart, Ling Lan stepped into the woods. Following that concealed pathway, she walked past this short 30 metres of forested land, and what met her sight was a tiny fissure, so small that it could have been missed, right at the bottom section of the mountain.

This fissure was so thin and narrow that it would have been unnoticeable from a distance. Even at a closer distance, without going through those tall, imposing trees blocking her line of sight, it would have been impossible to see it.

A strand of sky ¹, was it?

It truly was extremely concealed — the trick with the line of sight, along with the trap of habitual thinking, would easily cause most people to overlook it. Ling Lan herself had almost given up halfway through, but luckily she had remembered Instructor Number Nine's teachings, which had made her persist in her efforts.

Ling Lan's felt a stirring of emotion; perhaps the hint she needed would be inside this place? Or perhaps the answer?

Ling Lan slowly approached the fissure. Sure enough, it was a strand of sky — the fissure would only allow a person of average build to pass through it. If someone a little plumper would like to go through, they would probably have to make some special preparations before they could do so.

Of course, for Ling Lan, there was no problem at all. Ling Lan's spiritual appearance was currently that of a six year old child. At the very beginning when Ling Lan had first entered the learning space, Ling Lan's spiritual self had yet to merge completely with her current body, so her spiritual avatar had looked like her old self from the previous world for a period of time. But after that, as she grew older and the merge completed successfully, Ling Lan's spiritual avatar had slowly matched up with her outer appearance, so she now looked exactly the same inside the learning space as she did in the outside world.

Ling Lan successfully went through the strand of sky, and unexpectedly, there was another valley within the valley. The first thing she saw was a large lake — it was likely that this lake was the source of the little stream she had followed along the way here, while the water source for the lake must be the snow melt coming from the surrounding mountains reaching up to the sky.

Ling Lan skirted the edges of the lake, which was emitting wisps of cold air, and continued following the path. After walking for another two to three minutes, an expanse of glinting gold came into view, causing Ling Lan to squint involuntarily.

This was a large paddy field, which could be described as stretching as far as the eye could see. When the wind of the valley swept by, a golden wave would roll through the field. Right now was the harvest season of the valley, and Ling Lan had the sudden urge to rush into the fields and gather up all that bountiful grain...

Erm, the commoner mentality of her previous world was acting up again, influencing her thoughts and emotions. Ling Lan couldn't help but chuckle at herself.

Just as Ling Lan was about to continue moving on, a thought flashed through her mind. She recalled the mural that had caused her to be sucked into the black hole — in the first panel of that mural, wasn't there a paddy field just like this?

Could it be that she was now within the world on that mural?

This was actually highly probable! Since she had been sucked in by that mural, then it would make complete sense for her to have entered its world. If this deduction was correct, Ling Lan would have to think — what exactly did the learning space want her to do by sending her into this world?

Thinking back on the protagonist's smile in that first panel and in the final panel, about how the two smiles appeared so similar yet conveyed such different meaning, Ling Lan felt as if she were on the edge of an epiphany. Did her mission have something to do with those smiles?

Ling Lan had just thought of this when a mechanical voice rang out from the skies of the valley above her, "Congratulations, you have identified the vital clue. Now assigning the learning space's exclusive mission — seek out your correct evolution pathway!"

Chapter 91

Test or Choice?

Right after the announcement by the system, a large black vortex appeared once more before Ling Lan and sucked her in without any fanfare.

F*ck, again?! Ling Lan was speechless; couldn't the learning space be a little more gentle? However, having experienced it once, Ling Lan was no longer as flustered this time.

It was still impossible to pin down a sense of time, but when a brightness flashed before Ling Lan's eyes, she knew that she was about to be disgorged.

Sure enough, just like the first time, she was spat out into the air, but this time Ling Lan was ready for it. She landed on her feet in an absolutely elegant pose; Ling Lan decisively gave an internal cheer for her own outstanding performance.

Of course, the check before landing was still necessary, for Ling Lan had not forgotten the sly ways of the learning space... yep, it was definitely sly to the extreme. Ling Lan, who had fallen for its traps more than once at the beginning, had by now already learned the basic instinct of maintaining her vigilance at all times.

The spot where Ling Lan had landed on was a desolate hillside. The completely exposed yellow soil no longer contained any of the flourishingly beautiful vigour of life of the mountain valley, but was all dried and yellow cracked earth, with hardly any of the greenery which represented life. At a glance, there was only bleakness and desolation, and even an almost suffocating sense of despair.

Even more frighteningly, a weathered old road weaving through the land was already stained with a sheet of red, the way littered with corpses.

Not too far from Ling Lan, some frightened people were running in desperation, while a group of frenzied men chased them from behind with swords and knives in hand.

Ling Lan could see that this was definitely the scene from the second panel. Only now, the protagonist from the image was missing, while Ling Lan herself had been added.

Was this a test? Were they looking to see what choice she would make? To become an emissary of justice, or to remain as a cold-hearted observer?

Taking joy in helping others was a good thing — Ling Lan felt that this was the basics of being a good person. However, there was a prerequisite to this. Before helping, she had to consider whether she had the ability to help, and also whether the other was someone worthy of her help.

For instance, these people before her right now, those folks running away — were they worth her help? Also, how strong were those people carrying weapons? Were they good or bad?

Ling Lan, who was standing high up at the top of the slope, looked down at the bloody scene below with a cold expression, as if she could see none of the loss of life going on.

Why? Why did those people just think of running, and did not even try to fight back? Ling Lan's emotions were a little conflicted, somewhat sympathetic and filled with hate for the attackers, yet also a little disappointed with the victims. In fact, those people running away were not much fewer in numbers than those chasing them — if they had really wanted to fight back, the situation wasn't entirely hopeless.

Ling Lan looked at the person right at the front of those escaping, and saw that the person's eyes were filled with a desire to live so intense that it had turned into a fervour which cared nothing for the costs incurred in its pursuit. And abruptly, Ling Lan felt as if she understood.

When faced with a situation where their life hangs in the balance, humans would reflexively choose the path which they feel is the safest and most dependable. Like right now, in this sort of desperate situation, as long as he could run just a little faster than the other people, the man would be able to escape from the range of the slaughter, which meant that he had the hope of surviving...

This was basic human instinct, a deeply concealed inner ugliness. It was a demon that would be released in this sort of desperate times.

Ling Lan couldn't help but laugh, the sound laced with mockery. Wasn't this just another version of survival of the fittest?

Unfortunately... Ling Lan's gaze turned to those killers giving chase. The contempt and cruel joy in their eyes were unmistakable. All this just proved that no matter how hard

the people tried to run, it was useless. All of those people trying to escape would not be able to outrun the killers' blades. The killers were just whetting their appetite for the kill by first playing a game of cat-and-mouse, enjoying the spectacle of ants displaying the baseness of their humanity.

Ling Lan suddenly thought of the invasion of Japanese troops into China in her previous world. The Kwantung Army of a mere twenty thousand men had actually managed to conquer the entire Northeast China. This result was undoubtedly ludicrous — just the total population within those provinces was enough to flatten the Kwantung Army several times over. So why had they been able to invade and take control so easily? Was there the same baseness of humanity at play then?

Ling Lan shook her head and laughed in spite of herself, and cast off all the stray thoughts in her mind. The current Ling Lan was only the Ling Lan of this life; the previous world did not concern her anymore.

Just then, at the very back of the pack, an older man finally could not evade the swords any longer. He fell to the ground, but at the same time, he gave a strong shove to the young man who had been dragging him along all this time as they ran...

"Xiaolong, run quickly!" Knowing that he had no hopes of survival, the old man grabbed onto one of the chasing killers as they stepped over him. He held on with a death grip, and his face was filled with a savage sort of release.

The young man who had been shoved forwards did not dare to stop, and could only keep running forwards with all his strength, tears streaming down his face. He could not let this chance gifted by his relative go to waste.

The old man was swiftly killed under the hacking of blades, and one of the killers spat on his corpse as he pulled back his sword, and said scornfully, "Thinking to survive from our blades? In his f*cking dreams."

A dream, was it? Ling Lan's right hand surreptitiously slipped a sharp dagger from the side of her calf. She held the hilt in an inverted grip, with the end of the hilt between her thumb and index finger. Meanwhile, her left hand pulled out an extremely short tri-edge trench knife. She had decided that she would help these escapees — the actions of that old man before his death proved that they were not cowards; it was just that there was no one to spark their rage and courage.

Perhaps Ling Lan's killing intent was too strong, for one of the killers who was in the midst of enjoying his slaughter suddenly turned to look in Ling Lan's direction. Of course, Ling Lan wasn't planning to hide. Just like that, she stood high above and watched them, waiting for them to move.

Those people saw that it was just a child, and their faces filled with glee. After killing so many adults, they had gotten a little sick of it... perhaps this pitiful little rabbit would bring them more satisfaction. The first killer pointed Ling Lan out to the men beside him and indicated for them to bring the child over.

One of the men leapt out from the crowd and headed towards Ling Lan. Seeing this, Ling Lan suddenly turned and ran. This reaction was just too normal — when a child saw something or someone that frightened them, this was what they would do.

This movement of Ling Lan's also drew the attention of the runners, and Ling Lan could then clearly hear several shocked cries, as well as several shrill voices urging her to run faster!

So, even as their humanity was on the brink of crumbling, these people still retained a smidgen of care for the young? Humans, as expected, were extremely complicated. Even though it was obvious that they couldn't even help themselves in this scenario, seeing an even weaker being in peril, they couldn't help but be concerned.

However, the moment did not allow Ling Lan to ponder this any further. The killer who had split off from the group was already close, having run up the slope.

"Little baby rabbit, stop running. Come quietly and follow your gramps back, so we can play together..." The man's face was filled with excitement, and his tongue actually slipped out to lick at his lower lip. He was thinking of the ways he would torment this poor little wretch that seemed so pitiable, and was truly very pitiable.

Originally, Ling Lan had decided to just kill the other here, because she had already drawn the opponent to a blind spot out of view of the other people, but when she heard this, she changed her mind. She decided not to do anything, and let the other capture her.

Ling Lan wasn't going to let any of them go. She wanted to keep all of them right here. To do this, it wouldn't be easy. Ling Lan didn't know if the opponent had something that could transmit messages instantly. If she made a move, and the person had

reflexes quick enough to send out information on her to the rest of his group, it wouldn't be good.

It was true that Ling Lan wanted to help these people, but she also didn't want to bring trouble on herself. To avoid this, she would have to kill all the enemies here instantly. If these people were unprepared, she was confident that she could get them all in one go. But how could she make them lower their guard to let her draw close...? That had been Ling Lan's only problem, and now, with this, the problem was no longer a problem.

Ling Lan screamed as she was grabbed by the other. She struggled desperately, but how could her tiny body escape the powerful grip of an adult man? The man cheerfully dragged Ling Lan back to his group. Behind him, the tri-edge knife in Ling Lan's left hand was already positioned over the other's heart — at any strange movement, her knife would be thrust without mercy into the other.

"Chief, here's a cute little mouse." The beast holding onto Ling Lan threw her directly before his leader, where Ling Lan cowered and peered at them fearfully.

Meanwhile, those people running away had also been surrounded by some of the other killers, who were herding them towards Ling Lan's direction. Sure enough, the killers had just been playing around with these poor people, giving them the false impression that they had any chance of survival.

From the corner of her eyes, Ling Lan saw the despair on the ash-pale faces of the people being herded back at sword point. The opponents' sudden burst of speed let them know once and for all that they had never had any hope to begin with, and so, they gave up on themselves.

Why did they have to give up? Were they not willing to even try? Failure and giving up were what Ling Lan hated the most. Your life was your own — even if it had to end, shouldn't it be of your own choice?

"Doesn't look like someone from their village. He really looks so fresh and lovely." The leader immediately noticed how different Ling Lan was compared to the others. His brows drew in slightly, and there was some doubt and suspicion in his eyes.

Ling Lan's expression stayed unchanging — other than fright, there was just more fright — it perfectly encapsulated how a six year old child would react when faced

with strangers, when faced with danger... Yup, thank you very much to Instructor Number Five, for teaching her all these random useless things... now they were actually useful.

"Perhaps it's a child from a merchant group. Didn't we just rob and kill a merchant group yesterday on the old road?" One of the men didn't think it was a problem. It was quite normal after all for some people to slip through while they were busy robbing.

His subordinate's words cleared up the leader's concerns, though he really wasn't all that concerned to begin with, and had only been a little puzzled. After all, what harm could a five or six year old child do? Even if the child had a kitchen knife, it was a bigger worry whether the child would cut themselves.

"True, true, then let us have some fun." The leader's words made the men around him burst out into raucous laughter. Some of them were even itching to get started, eager to personally torment this pitiable little mouse. Wouldn't extreme terror look interesting on a child's face?

Meanwhile, the other people who had been chased over to observe didn't dare to make a sound, afraid that if they made any noise, they would be the one to be tortured and killed instead.

Of course, some of them even had the guilty thought that perhaps if this child could satisfy the perverse appetites of these demons, maybe they wouldn't be killed...

Ling Lan had not pinned any hopes on these people to begin with, but unexpectedly, someone within the group actually tried to beg for mercy on her behalf. "I beg you, please let him go. He's just a child..."

From the corner of her eyes, Ling Lan saw that the one who spoke was the young man who had been pushed by the old man. His face was full of entreaty, though of course, more despair — perhaps he too knew that speaking out was useless, but he had still chosen to open his mouth at a bid for that almost non-existent chance of hope.

Chapter 92

Massacre In Progress!

"Haha, punk, such pretty words... then, would you like to die first in his place?" The head stared at the young man in amusement. He was truly interested to see if there really was someone who would be willing to trade their life to save a completely unrelated stranger.

How could that be possible! Ling Lan knew very well that she herself would never do such a thing. She also didn't believe that there would be someone so saintly that they would willingly give their life for a stranger. However, the youth's reply stunned Ling Lan. For a moment, she even thought that she was experiencing an auditory hallucination.

That young man had actually stated that he was willing to trade his life.

F*ck! Darn learning space, couldn't it present a slightly more normal scenario? Ling Lan scorned it mentally, but it couldn't be denied that her heart had sped up for a beat at the moment she had heard this answer. Perhaps her heart also couldn't understand how an imbecile like this could exist in this dimension?

"Haha, little mouse, looks like you have pretty great luck! Someone's actually willing to die in your place." The head patted Ling Lan's face, and lifted his head to chortle, "Shouldn't you properly thank that big brother?" The young man's unexpected response had thoroughly amused the head, giving him a taste of something new. Of course, he was even gladder to destroy and push these two people before him into the depths of despair.

"Come, as thanks, you'll have to smile and watch as my subordinates slowly peel his skin off..." The head savagely twisted Ling Lan's head to face the young man. Meanwhile, the young man had already been propped up by two large men, while another, licking the polished knife in his hand, looked as if he was considering which part of the young man he should start cutting from.

When the people being forced to kneel saw this scene, their faces filled with terror. Some of them were even filled with disbelief, unable to comprehend why the young

man would try to save a strange child, and even be willing to be subjected to such inhumane torture for the child's sake before his death.

On the side of the killers, all of their attention were now on the young man. They had revelled in this sort of scenario all along — seeing the pain and despair of a person and listening to their wails before they died excited them. Even the head's attention was on the young man, completely forgetting about Ling Lan within his grasp.

This was a chance! With everyone's attention on the young man, Ling Lan knew that the best moment for her to strike had arrived.

Ling Lan's head remained still, but her arms twisted and bent to an extremely bizarre degree, breaking past the physical limits of the human body. The dagger in her hand then swung down mercilessly at the head still holding onto her face.

The head was guffawing as his subordinate slowly neared the young man, staring delightedly at the young man's desperate struggles. He was anticipating the scene when the young man would finally crumble, when he would scream and cry about how much he regretted his choice... then suddenly, he felt a cold flash at his throat, and then the scene in front of him was spinning.

He saw his subordinates, as they busied themselves making preparations to kill and maim those pitiful ants. He even saw the pitiable little mouse in his hands, who was strangely standing beside a very familiar body. But of course, most surprisingly, that body did not have a head...

Head? Familiar? Wasn't that his body? He was falling apart in his shock — what the hell had just happened?

Ling Lan had succeeded in one move, and without any hesitation, she broke the grip of the palm still holding onto her, and leapt at the few killers nearest to her. They still hadn't noticed that their head had been killed, and was currently happily watching as their companion threatened and tormented that self-sacrificing young man.

In order not to attract the attention of those at the front, Ling Lan kept a tight control on her speed. She didn't move as fast as she could, but made sure to watch her shadow, and moved with a stealthy silence. Several times she flickered, and another few people had their throats callously slashed by Ling Lan's dagger.

As blood gushed violently from their gaping throats, their mouths were muffled tightly

by Ling Lan as they died. They did not have any chance to sound a warning, to tell their companions that a death god was approaching from their backs.

Frankly, Ling Lan's throat-slashing technique was a learning space exclusive method — when she had cut the lifeline in their throats, she had also cut off their ability to speak. However, just to make sure there were no mistakes, Ling Lan still decided to cover their mouths.

The young man who was facing Ling Lan was the only one who could see all this clearly. His eyes bulged, and his expression turned to one of stunned disbelief, and even his initially struggling body abruptly stilled.

This strange reaction caused all the observing killers to pause in astonishment. Subconsciously, they prepared to turn and look, to see what exactly was going on behind them to elicit such a reaction from the young man, to the point that he would forget about his own imminent death...

What a dumb pig of a teammate!

Ling Lan decisively labelled the young man as 'dumb'. Luckily, he hadn't revealed any joy or excitement on his face, otherwise these killers would certainly have their guards up in a flash. Right now, they were just curious about what the young man had seen.

Ling Lan knew there was no more time. She needed to eliminate all these killers before they figured out what was going on, or else they might become an even bigger problem.

This time, Ling Lan no longer controlled herself; she unleashed every bit of her strength and speed. Like an ephemeral shadow, Ling Lan swept across the scene, the tri-edge trench knife and the dagger in her hands swiping interchangeably in a deadly dance. Everywhere she went, the unprepared killers found a weapon piercing one of their vital spots unerringly, sending countless blossoms of blood blooming into the air.

Ling Lan's path was a straight line — while this wasn't a good path for killing enemies, it was the best path for the rescue. Although the enemies at the fringes of both sides may be able to escape, this would prevent the young man from being used as a hostage.

As predicted, Ling Lan managed to stay one step ahead, killing the two men immobilising the young man before they could react. At the same time, she sent the young man behind her with a kick. There wasn't a single killer left there, so it was the

safest place.

By this time, quite a few of the killers had finally gotten a hold of themselves. Ling Lan had originally been afraid that they would scatter and run, depriving her of the chance of killing them all, but unexpectedly, the men just raised up their weapons and charged at her with dreadful bellows.

How nice! So the opponents were also dumb as pigs — this made both sides even then.

Ling Lan did not give these people any chances. Within several blinks of an eye, all of the men had been eliminated. Meanwhile, there wasn't a single speck of blood on Ling Lan's body, other than the dust which had been thrown up into the air during the fight.

On this desolate plain, countless corpses had been added once more, but this time, the bodies were those of the merciless killers.

Ling Lan stood up straight and coolly stowed away her weapons. She looked down at the head's head on the floor, whose frozen features still held that crazed smile with a trace of fear, unimaginably creepy. Ling Lan nodded to herself, and mumbled under her breath, "As expected, after a head leaves the body, it doesn't die straight away. There's a delay of one to two seconds, or perhaps even longer..."

Ling Lan did not spare a look for those unsettled survivors, but prepared to leave.

Ling Lan had just taken several steps forward when that young man shouted, "Wait!"

Because the young man had been silly enough to try and trade his life for hers, Ling Lan decided to give him a chance. "Hm?"

"Are you alone? If you have nowhere to go, why don't you come back with me to my village?" The young man worked hard to squeeze out a smile — he had just been saved from the brink of death after all; even the calmest of people would be unable to keep their cool, not to mention that he wasn't a calm person to begin with.

Was this the next hint of the mission? Ling Lan thought it over, and decided that she should go take a look at the village. After all, right now, she was completely clueless about this so-called evolution pathway and had no idea what she was supposed to do next anyway.

Seeing Ling Lan nod, the young man was thrilled. And just like that, Ling Lan prepared

to follow the young man back to his village.

Before they left, the people recovered some of the possessions they had had to discard while running, so everyone had a large bundle on their back as they prepared to set out. However, a majority of their companions were to remain here forever, never able to return. The survivors were unsure how they were supposed to face the relatives of those people who were eagerly awaiting their return.

On the road, Ling Lan found out that these people were all from the same village. Their excursion this time was to procure some necessities at a small town about 30 li ¹ away. They had never expected such a terrible thing to happen.

Ling Lan followed them as they made their way around a small hillside, and the desolation was noticeably clearing up as they progressed, with more and more greenery becoming visible. The young man told Ling Lan that their village was built around a natural heaven-blessed spring, which was the site of the green lung of this wasteland, allowing all the people in their village to survive in this arid land.

After traversing another distance of road, a green abundance of grass came into view. But when the young man turned excitedly to tell Ling Lan that they were about to arrive at the village, Ling Lan's expression changed dramatically.

She signalled for everyone to hide, while she quietly crept ahead. Luckily, this wasn't a boundless expanse of flat grassland, but was a hilly area with plenty of erratic ups and downs.

Soon, Ling Lan had followed the curve of the mountain to arrive at the mouth of the village. However, one look at the scene before her eyes and Ling Lan understood that the young man's village was also facing the tragic outcome of being massacred.

On several large trees by the village gates, a significant number of strapping young men were already bound and hung on the branches, some still alive. Meanwhile, around them, the elderly, the women, and the children were all tied together. They were kneeling on the ground and struggling desperately, crying and screaming as they tried to crawl closer to their loved ones. Laughing uproariously, the killers watching over them used their weapons to knock down anyone who tried to resist, and made them watch on helplessly as their sons, husbands, and fathers had their bowels cut open and their hearts torn out, dying before their very eyes.

"Scumbags!" The rage in Ling Lan's heart flared into a furious flame. This scene had thoroughly crossed over the line of Ling Lan's 'forbidden territory'. If at the start Ling Lan could be said to be hesitant to intervene because she hated troublesome matters, right now, Ling Lan just really wanted to kill every single one of these scumbags that definitely could not be considered human anymore.

However, Ling Lan wasn't someone who would let rage get to her head. She wasn't going to allow a moment of recklessness to cause her to fail to rescue these people and lose her life instead.

Ling Lan still remembered that phrasal hint given by the system. An exclusive mission... it was likely that she wasn't permitted to die in this mission. The moment she died, the mission would end, never to repeat.

After dealing with the learning space for almost a full six years, Ling Lan was very familiar with the learning space's mission reward mechanism. The stranger and more unique the mission was, the more generous the reward. With regards to the exclusive mission, just based off the word 'exclusive' alone, Ling Lan could confirm that the mission reward would definitely be generous to the point where she would regret it if she didn't manage to get it.

Therefore, from the very beginning, Ling Lan had never even considered giving up. No matter how great the difficulty, she must complete this mission.

Chapter 93

The Resurrected Demon in the Heart!

Ling Lan closely observed the situation, and found that there were only 17 men watching over the villagers. However, Ling Lan suspected that there were more men around than this group of killers, otherwise the hundred or so strong young men of the village would not have been rounded up so easily. There were probably more killers within the village proper.

Killing off these 17 men was actually not that difficult, but the true difficulty lay in how she could kill all of them before they could sound the alert and regroup. And like before, she needed to prevent a hostage situation from happening.

After considering it for a moment, Ling Lan snuck back to where the young man and the others were hiding, and relayed what was happening at the village entrance to them.

Just as everyone was panicking, with some even suggesting that they should just abandon the village and run, the young man once again offered a differing opinion. He felt that they should go back and save their relatives, otherwise their lives would be meaningless.

The young man's tenacity and passion moved the others, so everyone ultimately decided to go to the village entrance to try and rescue people. Of course, they were also well aware that everything was moot without Ling Lan's help — involuntarily, all of their gazes fell on Ling Lan, but only the young man's gaze was filled with apology. He had only invited the solitary Ling Lan to follow them out of good intentions, hoping that he could put down roots in their village and stop having to wander. Never had he expected that he would cause Ling Lan to be dragged into danger once again.

Ling Lan's original plan was to coordinate with these people anyway, to draw away some of the guards from the village entrance. So, she did not rebuff them, but instead presented them with a straightforward account of her plan.

Perhaps everyone had things they wanted to protect at all costs, for although Ling Lan's plan could very well cost them their lives, at that moment, not a single person

backed down, or voiced any objection. With faces filled with determination, the villagers agreed to execute Ling Lan's plan.

Seeing these people whose mental states were completely different from how they were initially, Ling Lan realised that humans, despite having countless faults, when placed in a situation where they had to protect something they just couldn't live without, their decisions may very likely astound. Take the situation right now for example, these people no longer displayed any of the selfishness they had at the start.

Ling Lan led them to a hidden col¹ by the village entrance, and then she sneakily dashed closer to the village entrance to lie flat on the ground. Luckily, Ling Lan was now a child with a small body, so even though there wasn't much cover near the village entrance, a slightly larger rock still managed to conceal most of Ling Lan's body.

Once in position, Ling Lan turned to the col and gave the others the hand signal to begin.

Those people abruptly stood up, lifted the wooden staffs and rocks they had found lying about, and rushed out of the col.

"Bastards! I'm gonna kill you all!" All of them shouted in unison.

The commotion startled those men at the village entrance, but when they saw the ragtag group with their makeshift weapons, they burst into wild laughter. In fact, there even was some element of pleasant surprise in their reactions, gleeful that more prey had decided to serve themselves up for their amusement.

In contrast, some of the women and elders tied up there started yelling in shock and terror, "Run away! Don't come!" At this point, they considered their lives forfeit, so those who were still free should just stay away. Every saved life counted.

Among the 17 people, there was a small head. He signalled for ten men from the group to go capture those suicidal people.

Ling Lan calmly watched as the ten men passed by her side and rushed towards the col. Meanwhile, the group led by the young men faltered and started to pull back amidst the cries of their relatives, actually turning tail to run. These actions naturally made the ten men chasing after them laugh even harder.

As this was happening, the remaining seven men did not stop their killing games. The

head let his subordinate pull out one of the women who had yelled for the others to run, but their chosen target was not the woman herself, but was the little girl child of three to four years of age clinging to her.

Another two subordinates came out and savagely ripped the little girl away from her mother. They paid no heed to the little girl's terrified wails, tying her hands together securely, preparing to hang her on one of the large trees of the village entrance. The tree that they chose was already filled with countless other murdered villagers.

Seeing this, the woman went berserk. Without any hesitation, she lunged at the man holding her daughter — although her hands were tied behind her back, she still sunk her teeth into his wrist, trying to make him let go of her daughter. In order for her own daughter to have a chance of survival, she didn't care if she had to give up her life. The woman portrayed the selflessness of maternal love to the max, causing Ling Lan's heart to clench, aching in sympathy.

This detestable learning space, why did it have to show her such a scene? Ling Lan almost lost her cool, almost wanting to just rush out and kill every single one of those scumbags right then and there.

But Number Five's crazy torments had not been in vain — Ling Lan's spirit wouldn't waver just because of this scene. Still, even so, both of Ling Lan's hands were clenched tightly over the weapons in her hands, almost as if she were going to crush them with her grip.

The woman actually knew that what she was doing was useless — her daughter still wouldn't be able to escape death in the end. Still, she refused to give up, desperately holding onto her bite on the killer's wrist.

Even though her head was being pummelled fiercely by the man, even though blood had already coated her entire face, even though she was likely to die in the very next second... she did not let up from start till end. Because she knew that the moment she loosened her teeth, her daughter's life would really be lost. And she absolutely did not want to see her own daughter die right before her eyes.

Seeing her mother being hit till her whole head was drenched with blood, the small little girl could only wail in shock and terror, "Mama, mama..."

That killer's awkward situation caused all the other men to laugh at him. There wasn't

much comradery among them, so no one even thought of coming over to help him escape from the woman's savage bite. Even the head himself was guffawing. Seeing a companion make a fool of themselves was also part of their entertainment.

Meanwhile, Ling Lan took the chance to slip behind them, finally baring her eager fangs.

"I've gotten sick of killing women, perhaps this little brat can excite me a little more." The head indicated for another subordinate to tie up the little girl.

Just then, Ling Lan pounced, leaping towards the thug still beating on the little girl's mother. At the same time, she sent a pebble flying with a kick, aimed straight for the killer who was just about to hang the little girl up.

A muffled whump, and the head of the killer who was tying up the little girl burst open. A reddish white liquid sprayed out, some of it staining the little girl's body.

Meanwhile, on Ling Lan's end, there was just a cold flash, and the thug's throat had been slashed open. A stream of warm blood spurted out to splash on the mother's head, mingling with her own blood on her face.

The thug's expression was a stunned one; till the very end, he had no idea why liquid would be spouting from his throat... he slowly fell over, slumping to the ground alongside the mother.

After dispatching the thug, Ling Lan did not stop. Before the other killers could understand what was going on, she unleashed her greatest speed and strength.

The remaining few killers didn't even see anything, or if they had sharp eyes, all they saw was a passing shadow — in the blink of an eye, Ling Lan had efficiently finished off the four small fry, and then she immediately leapt at the head.

The small head was undoubtedly the strongest of the bunch. Seeing what had happened, he instantly knew they had hit a steel plate²; he knew he should shout, so the master killers inside the village could come quickly...

The head instinctively defended his neck — his above average eyesight had allowed him to see that all his subordinates had died from a slash of the throat.

He thought that as long as he could hold out for a while, he would be able to yell and

inform his boss inside the village that an enemy had come... perhaps then he'd still have a chance of surviving.

Well, dreams were beautiful, but reality was cruel. How could Ling Lan give him such a chance? Otherwise she wouldn't have used bait to lure away a large portion of his subordinates; she had done that specifically to avoid giving them the chance to notify their compatriots in the village.

Just as the head was about to yell, he suddenly felt as if his palm had been pierced by something, and then the same sensation was at his throat. Due to the unimaginable speed, he actually didn't feel any pain. He had thought that it would hurt, but he felt nothing till the moment he died.

Ling Lan's tri-edge trench knife stabbed mercilessly into the opponent's throat, sealing his intended alert within his throat. She could even hear the faint clicking coming from deep within the opponent's throat as he tried to speak.

"You all have no more chances," said Ling Lan coldly as she pulled out the trench knife. The head's eyes were wide as he fell face first to the ground. In fact, even before Ling Lan had removed the trench knife, the other was already fully dead.

Ling Lan did not hesitate, but immediately rushed towards the col outside the village entrance. She still remembered that there were other people waiting for her rescue, and ten more killers for her to dispatch.

Ling Lan hadn't moved far from the village entrance when she caught sight of the group of killers chasing after the young man's company. The time Ling Lan had used to kill the seven men at the village entrance had really been very short, so these people hadn't had time to get very far.

At this time, Ling Lan had no more concerns, so these ten killers were summarily dispatched by her. Meanwhile, the villagers who had played bait were all fine, with only one person spraining their ankle while running, but it wasn't serious and wouldn't affect his mobility.

The young man and the others followed Ling Lan back to the village entrance, and helped to untie and release the bound villagers there. Upon questioning, they found out that the village had been set upon by bandits and that this group was just the first batch of captured villagers. There were more villagers within the village whose fates

were uncertain, though the odds weren't in their favour.

Once again, Ling Lan became the focus of attention. Ling Lan simply instructed the young man to find a place to hide with all of the villagers, while she herself went deeper into the village to scout.

Under the grateful stares of all the villagers, Ling Lan slipped into the village. She wasn't doing this for the villagers, but rather to vent the righteous aggression she had bottled up inside. She just wanted to kill all those inhumane beasts, but of course saving some of the villagers along the way was a welcome plus.

Ling Lan did not have a so-called hero-complex; she just didn't want this sort of inhumane beasts to exist in this world. Perhaps the history of the invasion of China, so hated by the Chinese people, in her past world had left a deeply embedded wound within the hearts of all the impassioned descendants of China. Thus, when faced with such a similar scene, this banked rage was triggered.

"I am me. I only live to follow my heart." Ling Lan had temporarily forgotten the mission, only wanting to go wild without reservations for once, and let out that demon imprisoned within her heart.

Indeed, under Number Five's insane torments, Ling Lan, who had once lost control of herself, was just like a demon who would cut people down like grass. And right now, facing this group of beasts wearing human skins, was the best time for the demon within her heart to resurrect.

A trace of madness bloomed in Ling Lan's eyes, but this madness was very restrained, so honed and focused in its intensity that it presented as calm.

Chapter 94

The Test of Dao

Ling Lan secretly snuck into the village. By now, the inside of the village was a sea of blood, a true hell on earth. Quite a number of the villagers had died on the roads or in their doorways, every one of them with their eyes wide open, staring sightlessly at their ruined village, unable to be at peace. Their facial expressions differed — there was fear, despair, and even some with a sort of speechless grief and indignation... perhaps they were filled with bitter hate, wondering why this catastrophe would befall them when they had just been peacefully living out their lives...

Along her way, Ling Lan crouched down, silently closing the eyes of one of the villagers who had died a traumatic death. Right then, there was not a speck of emotion in Ling Lan's gaze. It was as calm as water, and a rush of terrifyingly cold air was emanating from her body.

As she walked, whenever she saw any killers alone or in small groups, Ling Lan would decisively dispose of them before silently leaving. If she saw a large group of thugs together, she would go around them. Perhaps these killers were too engrossed in their killing frenzy, for they did not notice at all that their companions were being slowly picked off little by little.

Then, at one point, when Ling Lan had once again gotten rid of another batch of thugs, she accidentally missed one who had been relieving himself in a hidden corner, out of sight.

Ling Lan noticed her mistake swiftly and sent a dagger flying through the air to pierce through the other's throat, but it was still a step too late. A sharp whistle rent the blood-stenched air of the village.

Ling Lan couldn't help but make a soft sound of regret. Just as she had feared, the thugs really had a way to pass on a message instantly. Without a doubt, the other thugs would now be wary and on the defensive, which would make Ling Lan's hunt a little more difficult.

Still, it was just a little more difficult... a cold smile appeared on Ling Lan's lips. The

hunting game would not end just because of this.

Ling Lan's figure slowly disappeared from her present location. By the time the other killers rushed to the scene, all they could see was their companions' corpses lying on the ground, without any sign of the one who killed them.

This incident was quickly reported to the main leader of this particular massacre, who immediately gave the order for his subordinates to gather, naturally not forgetting to ask them to bring hostages along with them. He highly suspected that this master killer may have ties with the village people.

As they gathered, Ling Lan managed to kill off yet a few more groups of thugs, saving a significant number of villagers in the process. But Ling Lan did not stop to talk to any of them, only continuing on her hurried way after killing the thugs.

The villagers had no idea where Ling Lan came from, but this did not prevent them from being grateful for her help. Moreover, Ling Lan did not know that, some of the rescued villagers didn't just leave — some of the strapping young men found some weapons and made their own rescue teams, silently making their way in different directions, hoping to save even more of their loved ones and other village folk.

Meanwhile, outside the village entrance, the young man — after finding a relatively safe location for the younger kids, the weak and infirm old folk, and the fragile women, as well as some injured men who could not fight — led the remaining villagers who could still put up a fight to pick up the weapons of the killers Ling Lan had killed, and rushed over too.

Along the way, many bloody battles broke out. The villagers went head to head with small groups of killers, and paid a bloody price to overwhelm these killers stained with the blood of their relatives, saving their own relatives who were still alive.

Only when all of the killers had gathered before the main leader did the leader discover that this place which, in his eyes, was a place where they could kill and indulge in their perverse interests, had actually cost him around two-thirds of his men, leaving behind only about a hundred men.

"D*mn it! Who is it? Show yourself!" The main leader was enraged by this drastic loss of men. He signalled for one of his men to bring out one of the hostages, and then

bellowed, "If you don't show yourself, I'll kill him."

Since the hidden attacker had come for the sake of this village, then they must certainly care about the lives of these ants. As long as the other showed themselves, the leader believed that he and his men would definitely be able to hack the attacker into a thousand pieces.

After waiting for a minute, the surroundings still remained silent as a tomb. With vehemence, the leader shouted, "Kill him."

The villager was summarily executed by his subordinate, and blood coated the ground, drawing the terrified screams of the other villagers.

"I'm not a saintly matron, or a benevolent hero, all I know is, only keeping calm will give me the chance to accomplish my goals." Ling Lan held on tightly to the weapons in her hands, her eyes coolly observing the bloody scene before her.

Indeed, her goal was to kill every one of these beastly scumbags and save as many villagers as she could. As such, she could not give in to irrational ardour.

The leader saw that his first threat was ineffective, and signalled for a subordinate to bring out three more villagers. This time, one of the villagers was a tiny baby still in its swaddling clothes.

Ling Lan's irises contracted, and she shut her eyes in anguish. Did she have to continue tolerating this? *Do I really have to wait until they become tired of killing and become distracted, and a chance presents itself, for me to make a move? Goddammit! My heart tells me — no, I don't want it to be like this.*

Instructor Number Five, your so-called insane-level training didn't work after all, otherwise, why can't I become truly cold-blooded? Why can't I turn a blind eye to an innocent child dying before me? Could this be my forbidden ground? Does this count as a human weakness?

According to my instructor's words, I should restrain this tendency towards mercy to become stronger, and not yield to my soft heart and compassion. I should restrain it, but...

Within Ling Lan's heart, a dilemma occurred for the first time. Her initially steady heart started showing subtle signs of uncertainty...

Within the learning space, Number Five and Number Nine barged into Number One's space unannounced.

Number One, who had been standing alone in the virtual space deep in thought, saw the uninvited guests and was rather displeased. Coldly, he said, "What did you two come here for?"

"I would like to know, what Dao Ling Lan will choose in the end." Number Nine's face was full of worry. If Ling Lan selected a Dao unsuited for her in her evolution, she may very well end up doing double the work for half the results.

In contrast, Number Five smirked evilly. "I hope she walks the path of the Heartless Dao, or maybe the Killing Dao." This was a type of shortcut — although the barriers she would face in the later stages with these Daos would be a little more difficult than other Daos, that was after all a consideration for the future. Number Five believed that there would be ways to resolve it then, and it was overall worth it since she would be able to raise herself to the level of a master within a short period of time.

For this purpose, his training in the period preceding this had intentionally been steering Ling Lan's personality and way of handling things towards the direction of these two Dao. If Ling Lan held fast to her memories of this time, it was highly possible that she would end up walking one of these two Dao.

"I disagree!" raged Number Nine. "Ling Lan may look like she has a hard heart, and she may do things with resolution, and have an extraordinarily high tolerance — but I know, Ling Lan's true self is passionate, and gentle... she is compassionate, so the path suited for her should be the Fellowship Dao or the Benevolence Dao."

"I only know that the test she entered is for the Sovereign Dao," Number One told them about Ling Lan's current situation.

"What?!" yelled Number Five and Number Nine simultaneously in shock. They had never considered that Ling Lan would enter the test for the Sovereign Dao. Ling Lan had no sovereign-like thoughts at all — how could it be possible for her to pass this test?

Seeing the shock-pale faces of the two and their flustered appearance, Number One harrumphed coldly and said, "Entering the test for the Sovereign Dao, doesn't mean

that she must definitely walk this Dao."

"But, it is typically very hard for anyone to jump out of the boundaries of the test and forge their own Dao." Number Nine had no confidence at all on this matter. Based off what she knew, there has not been a single child that had managed to make this step.

Number Nine's words caused Number One and Number Five to fall silent. They too knew that this was extremely difficult, and that Number One's words were mostly self-consolation.

"Perhaps, Ling Lan really can walk the path of the Sovereign Dao. It's not like every person who walks it has sovereign-like thoughts to begin with... hehehe!" Number Five rambled on for a bit before he couldn't continue to lie to himself and the others anymore, and could only use fake laughter to fend off Number One and Number Nine's unimpressed cold stares.

It was true that sovereign thinking wasn't something innate, but a child would still have to have some instinctive greed on this front. For example, liking from young to be stronger by a head, taller by an inch, liking to show off, or even liking to take on leadership roles... Ling Lan was truly lacking in this respect.

"I believe Ling Lan is not a typical person," said Number One finally after a long moment of silence. He believed that no matter if the Sovereign Dao suited Ling Lan or not, Ling Lan would definitely complete this test and find the Dao that truly belonged to her.

Ling Lan, who was still within the test mission, closed her eyes in silent contemplation. She heard the leader's countdown, and knew that if she didn't show herself, three lives would end right there, one of which was a babe who had not been long in this world.

"Kill them!" The leader's cry woke Ling Lan up, and she subconsciously took a step forward, revealing her silhouette.

"You finally appeared..." Amidst the leader's wild laughter, his three subordinates who were holding onto the hostages firmly swung their sharp blades down...

"Impulsiveness is a demon; the results are not nice." Ling Lan's gaze no longer wavered. Her split second falter had shown her the truth, making her realise that

being soft-hearted was indeed a mistake. "But, holding back was an even bigger mistake. I might as well have just chosen to battle it out in blood from the start — exchanging a tooth for a tooth, and blood for blood was what I should have done."

Why did she have to control herself? Why did she have to worry so much? If she hadn't shown up, these villagers would still have died at the hands of these killers. In that case, she might as well have killed off all of these killers as soon as possible, and saved as many people as she could that way.

The choice was actually very simple. She didn't have to be a saintly matron or a benevolent hero — under the condition that her life was safe, she only needed to do whatever she could do with resolve. Hesitation would only cause her to sink deeper into more troublesome plights, just like what was happening now.

The main leader saw Ling Lan rushing forwards with an icy expression, and signalled for his subordinates to pull out five or six villagers, shouting, "Don't move, or else I'll kill them!"

"Do it. I will avenge them." Ling Lan's speed became even faster, and she lunged fiercely at the killer closest to her, blades swinging.

Seeing that the attacker wasn't fazed at all by his threats, the leader screamed in crazed anger, "Kill them! Kill them all!"

"Do it. I will also do the same and kill you all." The current Ling Lan had eyes like ice, and everywhere her hands fluttered by, a corpse was left behind amidst a spray of blood. Ling Lan did not dodge these blood splatters, and soon her sweet little face had been stained crimson with blood, which slowly fell from her face drip by drip. She looked just like a ghoul that had crawled out from hell, here to collect all the living souls from the area.

"Who the hell are you?" Finding that the villagers' lives were no deterrent to Ling Lan's slaughter, the leader was a little panicked. Ling Lan's killing method was quick and decisive, extremely efficient. Every swing of her arm took away yet another of his subordinates' lives — in short order, ten or so men had already died by her hand.

Chapter 95

Cracking the Mission!

"A debt collector." Ling Lan's trench knife stabbed mercilessly into the heart of one of the subordinates, and blood once again stained her hair. As she leapt away to lunge at another, she didn't forget to leave this response behind.

Ling Lan's savagery caused the killers to have no time to bother with the villagers. They all lifted their weapons and charged at Ling Lan, preparing to surround her and attack her from all sides.

"I've wounded him!" shouted one of the thugs suddenly. There was still a trace of blood clinging to his weapon, but this was also his final achievement, for Ling Lan's dagger cut through his throat the next second.

"After striving for so long, I still couldn't avoid getting injured." Ling Lan looked at the cut on her shoulder area impassively. Though it was still bleeding sluggishly, Ling Lan did not retreat at all, seemingly not feeling any pain from the wound. She decisively swung her weapons around and thrust them at the next foe.

She had no wild hopes of killing all of these beastly scumbags without any injury to herself... although she had considered at one point to complete the mission perfectly in such a way, which was why she had chosen to tolerate so much at the start. But that sort of toleration had made her feel unbearably frustrated and irritable, deeply uncomfortable. In contrast, though she had gotten injured, her current mood was extraordinarily light. She relished this sort of battle, this sensation of freedom.

This is the kind of battle I yearn for! No suppression or holding back, free to do whatever I want to do!

Yes, freedom is what I want!

Humans were resilient. As long as they were given a slim thread of survival, they would be able to unleash unimaginable power... and the villagers who had been held captive here were no exception.

The tools the thugs had used to threaten them had finally been turned back against the thugs themselves, and Ling Lan's overwhelming strength and ferocity stoked the villagers' courage. Everyone there knew that if they didn't fight back, all that awaited them was death, and now that they had the hope of survival...

For the sake of their husbands and wives, for the sake of their parents and relatives, and also for themselves, everyone in the village — whether male or female, young or old — took up weapons, determined to engage these criminals who had destroyed their happy homes in a battle to the death.

It was very difficult for regular people with low combat ability, like the villagers, to finish off these exceptionally strong killers. However, the villagers had already decided to risk everything, determined to die honourably even if they couldn't succeed. Just think about how many villagers there were — if one wasn't enough, then try two; if two wasn't enough, then try three.

This was no longer a game where the strong butchered the weak, but was now a horrific melee fight. Beside the body of every despicable killer, you could basically see a villager tangled up with him, almost inseparable.

This was how the villagers fought. Very simply, the elderly entrusted their hopes to the younger generation, rushing forward to pull a random killer into a death embrace — then, even if their chests were hacked into paste, they wouldn't let go. It had to be said that the latent reserves of humans were truly unfathomable — the strength of these old people before death became inexplicably horrifying, capable of rendering the killers completely immobile. Then, the second villager would rush forward, followed by the third, the fourth and so on... until the opponent was dead.

The villagers' sudden fearlessness in the face of death shocked the killers; following the death of one killer after another, the remaining killers actually began to panic. In particular, once their greatest leader was successfully killed by Ling Lan, they could no longer control the fear in their hearts, and began fleeing like beaten dogs towards the outsides of the village.

Though Ling Lan tried her best, a few killers still managed to escape, making her feel a little disappointed. She had really wanted to end every single one of them here.

Although the killers were dead, this village was pretty much destroyed. Only 30% of the villagers had survived, with a majority being women and children, as well as a

small number of young men. Almost all of the elderly had perished in that final clash.

Ling Lan didn't linger; she felt that it was inappropriate for her to remain in this village which needed to be rebuilt. The villagers were still in a stupor from their grief, and so did not notice when Ling Lan left.

"Benefactor, don't go," shouted the young man suddenly, rushing over with the rest of the villagers his team had rescued.

This shout seemed to awaken the villagers from their grief, and they all gathered around her, begging Ling Lan not to leave them.

Ling Lan did not look back, only replying coolly, "I... am not your benefactor."

"No, you are. If you hadn't killed most of the killers, we wouldn't have been able to survive." Of course, the villagers didn't believe Ling Lan's words — if Ling Lan hadn't intervened, they wouldn't have been able to oppose the killers no matter how hard they tried.

"You've saved us. We are willing to acknowledge you as master." Perhaps the villagers were grateful, or perhaps they just needed the protection of someone strong, for the young man's suggestion was unequivocally approved — they were all willing to become Ling Lan's servants.

The villagers' words led Ling Lan to recall the image within the third panel of the mural. That protagonist had possessed countless subordinates — perhaps this was where he had started to amass power. According to the mission itinerary, she should just agree and continue to experience all the images within those six panels of the mural — perhaps then she would complete the mission.

Ling Lan fell into a contemplative silence, and then, just as she was about to speak up and agree, she abruptly remembered her mission description — to find the right evolution pathway for herself. If she just blindly followed the contents of the mural, would that be 'right'?

Ling Lan felt as if she had hit upon a key point. Back then, it was because she had noticed the difference between the protagonist's smile in the first panel and the sixth panel that she had been sucked into the mural... in that case, could she take it as the protagonist's path of becoming a king and total domination being a mistake? So the main point of this mission was the term 'right'?

Ling Lan had the strong feeling that the answer was right before her, but there just happened to be a thin layer of paper still in the way... the more she thought about it, the more confused she became, until she reached a point where she felt that her thoughts were a bit of a mess.

Ling Lan habitually sat down in a meditative pose and began circulating her Qi. After one circuit, the stray thoughts in her mind all disappeared, and things became clearer.

Ling Lan once again thought back to the earlier question, but this time she started chasing the thought from the beginning. It had all started because she had noticed that the smile in the first panel and the sixth panel were different...

The smile in the first panel was sincere, innocent, and passionate, while the smile in the final panel had become fake, affected, and cold. This indicated that after the protagonist had gone through the experiences of the mural, he had changed from a pure-hearted youth into a dark and deceitful ruler. As he grew up, he had also lost his innocence...

The right evolution pathway? A notion sparked through Ling Lan's mind. She suddenly thought — could it be that the learning space felt that the protagonist's choice to become a ruler was wrong?

No, no, no... Ling Lan felt that there was something wrong with this assumption; perhaps there was still some deeper meaning... Ling Lan thought back to the countless other murals she had seen in the tunnel. Although they all depicted different things, with different forms and different content, they all had one point in common — their protagonists were all strong in a particular aspect.

This fit perfectly with the learning space's reason for existing. Cultivating its host to become strong was the only calling of the learning space, so regardless of which path of strength the host decided to pursue, the learning space would not restrict its host, but was rather happy to provide support. Thus, there was absolutely nothing wrong if the protagonist in the mural decided to become a king who liked to expand his territory.

Then, the problem might be with the protagonist's mental state — could the loss of self be what the learning space really disapproved of?

At this thought, Ling Lan felt as if she had opened a door that had originally been

sealed up tight, bringing in a sea of light. All the conundrums she had before had been answered.

Ling Lan thought to herself: *although the protagonist managed to become a king, he lost the sincerity and passion he had in the beginning, losing his true self. The mission this time may very well be for me to understand my true self, and figure out what my true thoughts are...*

I want to possess a healthy body, I want to live freely, I want to do whatever I want to do without worry. I don't want to see any sinister plots, and I don't want to be controlled. I want to make a few close friends and bosom buddies, and raise an exceptional baby. Yes, I hate troublesome things, and I don't want to be tied down...

Ling Lan abruptly opened her eyes, stood up to face the young man waiting patiently by her side and said firmly, "I refuse!"

"Why?" cried the young man sadly. His entire expression actually twisted, and his gaze was resentful.

"Your fates rest in your own hands. What does it have to do with me?" Ling Lan said impassively. This was truly spoken from her heart. "Why should I take care of you all? Why should I bear your responsibilities? No one can force me to do what I don't want to do, no one."

"Then why did you save us? You might as well have let us die at the hands of those people." The young man burst into tears, and all the villagers also started crying. Even the sky started to weep rain, as if unsatisfied with Ling Lan's heartlessness.

"To save or not to save is my choice, to die or not to die is yours..." Ling Lan threw down this final statement, and then immediately turned to walk away, no hesitation at all in her demeanour.

In that moment, Ling Lan had made her decision. She wanted to be a free spirit, and do whatever she wanted to do. She didn't want to live according to the world's rules of right and wrong, and restrict her own movements that way.

Gradually, Ling Lan left that blood-stained village further and further behind, coming to a desolate hillside of yellow soil. Ling Lan didn't know if her choice was the right one, but she regretted nothing. Instead, her heart was light, because the mission this time had let her reaffirm the path she wanted to walk. So that she wouldn't be tied

down, so that she could live freely, so that she could give birth to an absolutely exceptional baby — she needed to become much stronger!

Just as Ling Lan was about to unleash a scream to vent the pent up emotions in her heart, a black vortex suddenly appeared once again before her eyes, pulling her inside it in an instant.

F*ck, again?! Ling Lan only had enough time to say that before she was entirely devoured by the black vortex.

The tall slope of yellow soil once more subsided into silence, just as if Ling Lan had never been there.

Alone in his space, Number One was sitting cross-legged in contemplation when his mind flickered, and then he abruptly disappeared. At the same time, with joyful faces, Number Five and Number Nine also disappeared from within their own spaces, and the three of them appeared together before the gates of the test of Dao.

Very quickly, a black vortex appeared before them, and then a small figure dropped out from it.

Ling Lan calmly adjusted her posture in the air, and then landed safely on her feet.

"Ling Lan, congratulations, you have passed," said Instructor Number One coolly.

Number Five and Number Nine shared a glance, subtle knowing smiles on the corners of their lips. Number One's true emotions were not as calm as his appearance would suggest.

Chapter 96

The Dominance Dao!

Ling Lan blinked at the three instructors before her in bemusement. She hadn't expected this mission to involve all three of her instructors at the same time — the fact that even the usually aloof Number One had appeared made her feel rather touched.

"What's going on, instructors?" asked Ling Lan.

Number Nine was the most anxious; she immediately opened her mouth to ask, "Ling Lan, what Dao did you choose?"

"Dao?" Ling Lan was taken aback, but understood right after and replied quickly, "I didn't choose any of those Daos."

"How could that be possible?" Number Nine's face was filled with disbelief. Passing meant that the testee had found the Dao that belonged to them — why did Ling Lan have to say that she hadn't chosen a Dao? Number Nine wasn't the only one who didn't believe her; even the typically contrary Number Five also didn't believe her. Only Number One had an unfathomable look of deep thought on his face.

"Well, I can't really say I didn't choose..." said Ling Lan bashfully as she rubbed her head and smiled. "I chose to walk my own Dao, and then the system said I passed and just let me out."

Number One's eyes brightened, flaring with an intense light, while Number Five and Number Nine's faces were filled with shock, which quickly turned into triumphant joy... how lucky were they, to be able to raise a pupil who could forge her own Dao — this sort of person would undoubtedly become a historic figure.

Ling Lan said somewhat regretfully, "Unfortunately, I'm not sure whether I can complete it. The development of this Dao is all up to me to figure out."

After Ling Lan had been sucked in by the black vortex from the scene of the second panel, she hadn't appeared in a new scene, but had entered an expanse of nothingness instead. Everything had been a grey blankness around her, not a single thing in existence, while Ling Lan herself had just been suspended in mid-air within this nothingness.

Just as Ling Lan was getting restless, the grey blankness suddenly twisted and actually turned into an enormous grey dragon to pounce at the suspended Ling Lan.

Back then, Ling Lan had been terrified, but finding that she had been robbed of the ability to move, she could only watch helplessly as this enormous grey dragon swallowed her whole.

Within that split second, countless images flashed before Ling Lan's eyes. The countless Daos which existed in the world were displayed before her, and she experienced all the trials and epiphanies associated with the Daos along with the images... when Ling Lan woke up once more, she found that she was still suspended within the nothingness, unharmed, as if all that had just happened had just been a passing dream.

An extremely wispy voice came from a distance: "Of these countless Daos, one of them belongs to you. Which one will you choose?"

"Dao? Is that the evolution pathway I want?" asked Ling Lan pensively.

"Those paths earlier, didn't you see them all?" replied the wispy voice.

"Hate, frenzy, tolerance, control, ties, responsibility, and even kindness and murder... every person had to abandon some part of themselves... is this the cost for evolution?" This sort of choice greatly displeased Ling Lan. Was it really necessary to make sacrifices to become stronger?

"Gain and loss, has always been fair; to sacrifice or not, is up to the individual." The wispy voice was cold and emotionless, but it also spoke the truth. In the end, everything was up to personal choice.

"Is it fair?" Ling Lan closed her eyes, once again immersing herself in the grief and epiphanies brought on by those images. It was true that all those people had become

the top of their fields, standing at the pinnacle of human achievement, but they also lost some very important things in the meantime. Even those people who had chosen the Fellowship Dao still lost their family — when one's love was all-encompassing, and all men were equal in one's eyes, what significance did family have?

She did not believe that those people had chosen the Fellowship Dao purely for themselves to begin with — it was likely that they had chosen it also for the sake of their families, but in the end, the outcome was distinctly different from their original intentions. In that case, what purpose was there in becoming strong this way?

It was true that Ling Lan wanted to become strong because she didn't want to live a restrained life. If she was strong enough, her father's military benefits wouldn't be coveted by others, and she eventually wouldn't have to keep pretending to be a man to hold onto them.

She really wanted to give birth to an exceptional baby, but her identity now meant she needed to be strong enough to push down a man she liked in order to get the other half of the genetic material needed for her child.

Moreover, she wanted her child to be able to live openly without having to sneak around, growing up honestly under the care of her boundless love... she wanted to live this life without any regrets, looking down upon the whole world with a smile... all of this required her to become even stronger, perhaps even strong enough to stand at the very top.

However, this didn't mean that she was willing to sacrifice certain things in the process. For instance, she didn't want to become a madman or a villain, scorned by the world, so the Demonic Dao, Ghoul Dao, or Killing Dao were all unsuitable for her. She also didn't want to become a saint, a benevolent figure, or a king, to become some sort of leader, for this would force her children to have to be on their guard from a young age, losing the childish innocence and joy they should have. Thus, the Sage Dao, Sovereign Dao, and Benevolence Dao were all not the Dao she needed either. Whatever emotionless-type Dao or relationship-centred Dao were all nonsense, Heart's Dao, Literary Dao, Martial Dao... all these evolutionary Daos with their multitude of restrictions and conditions were not at all pathways that Ling Lan wanted to walk...

After analysing each and every one of the Daos, Ling Lan still couldn't find a Dao that suited her. Dissatisfied, she said, "Didn't you say that there would a Dao suitable for me among all these Daos? Why is there none that catches my eye?"

The wispy voice rang out once more, "There are hundreds and thousands of Dao in the world, how do you know that there is no Dao that is suitable for you?"

Ling Lan's response was quick. "In other words, the Daos I've seen are only a portion? Then isn't that strange? Why won't you let me see them all?"

The wispy voice rang out again, but it no longer sounded cool and unaffected; this time, there was a trace of dissatisfaction in its tone as it said, "Due to coincidence and serendipity, you've been given the blessing of several Daos. Don't be too greedy now."

Ling Lan cared not for the voice's dissatisfaction, but rather found the answer she sought from its response. "In that case, I won't choose any of those Daos you've shown me."

Ling Lan's reply stunned the wispy voice. "Why?" Previously, anyone faced with this situation would always joyfully choose one of the Daos offered; why would this person before it now bear to give up such a great opportunity? It was finding this a little hard to accept.

"Didn't you say that there were hundreds and thousands of Dao in this world? Then I need to find the one that suits me best!" Ling Lan used its own words against it, the teasing tone in her voice obvious.

The wispy voice was instantly aggravated, "All these Daos I've given you are Daos which have been tried and tested, created and developed by those who have succeeded, capable of helping you grow strong quickly. Anything else would have to depend on your own capabilities, leaving you stumbling in the dark — you may end up accomplishing nothing in your life, unable to become strong... are you stupid?"

"Hehe, not faking it anymore?" Ling Lan poked fun at the voice.

The voice went silent, and Ling Lan continued to say, "You're the system of the learning space, aren't you? Stop pretending to be some mysterious master and just tell me straight, what exactly is this?"

"Choosing the right evolutionary Dao, refers to your path of evolution." This time, the voice was no longer wispy, but was the usual system's voice Ling Lan was familiar with.

Only then did Ling Lan nod contentedly. There we go — acting all high and mighty like

some deity, beating around the bush with mysticism and riddles; these were all things she wasn't used to. "Isn't this just taking on training step by step?" asked Ling Lan curiously. She still hadn't wrapped her mind around the appearance of this mysterious concept of Dao.

"Dao is a sort of enlightenment, a plane of thought, a realm... not just regimented numbers and training." The system's reply was airy, but Ling Lan still understood and nodded somewhat thoughtfully. This was thanks to Ling Lan having read way too many novels in the past — some Chinese Buddhist scriptures and teachings would often appear in novels, so this sort of words with deep zen flavour was no problem for her.

"All those Daos I saw were a type of extreme. In other words, when someone walks to a particular extreme, he may be able to realise some profound secret of that extreme..." There were many things to do with humans which cannot be explained by technology. For instance, the Qi cultivation exercises she had learned was one of these miraculous things.

This time, the learning space's system did not respond, for these things needed to be discovered by the host themselves.

After another few minutes, the learning space's system asked again, "You really don't want to choose those Daos? They're really a shortcut, you know."

But Ling Lan recalled those cultivation-type novels she had read — it's been said that the experience of others can only be referenced but not imitated blindly, because everyone is different. Only those things which one has realised on one's own are truly suited for oneself, so perhaps Dao is the same...

Ling Lan had her answer. She shook her head once more, "I don't want them."

"Is it that you don't want to become strong anymore?" The system's voice was somewhat disappointed; its host Ling Lan was exceptional on so many fronts, so it just couldn't understand why Ling Lan would give up this obvious chance to become strong.

"Of course I want to, but like you said earlier, only one Dao of the hundreds and thousands in this world will be suitable for me — and I really want to walk that Dao," said Ling Lan firmly.

"Even if you end up a complete failure, you mustn't regret this," cautioned the system once more.

"No regrets." Ling Lan was a greedy person — she wasn't willing to cast away her feelings. Perhaps this avarice would ultimately cause her to lose the chance to grasp Dao, but she believed that even if she never found the Dao that belonged to her, she could still become strong.

"In that case, shutting down the learning space's legacy system..." Since the host had no need of it, then there was no need for the existence of the learning space's legacy system.

Following this announcement, Ling Lan felt all the miscellaneous images of Dao within her mind being extracted, along with all the accompanying epiphanies. At the end, a thundering voice crashed down, "What is Dao?"

The answer spilled forth from within Ling Lan, "A human's true heart!"

Her reply echoed throughout the space, and the light in Ling Lan's eyes grew brighter and brighter. She said firmly once more, "Yes, a human's true heart."

"And what is your Dao?"

"Freedom, an existence without shackles, so my Dao should also be free, not limited to the boundaries of any Dao... it is the existence of any possible Dao."

Ling Lan abruptly lifted her head, and the light in her eyes was so bright it could almost illuminate this entire virtual space. "So, I shall name my Dao as the Dominance Dao."

"Congratulations, you have passed." The voice of the system rang out once more, telling Ling Lan the good news. Before Ling Lan could continue to ask any questions, she had been whisked away again by a black vortex, and when she was spat out once more, she had already arrived at where Instructor Number One and the others were at.

"The Dominance Dao, is it?" Number One peered intently at Ling Lan, and a momentary trace of satisfaction flit through his eyes. This was truly the dominant air his disciple should have; he was very pleased with Ling Lan's choice.

Chapter 97

Logging Into the Virtual World!

Mission completed, Ling Lan was sent back to the great hall of the learning space by Number One and the others. Little Four was sitting in a corner, nodding off. When Ling Lan appeared, Little Four was immediately shocked awake, and opening his eyes to see Ling Lan, he quickly pounced and hugged her tight.

The sudden extraction of Ling Lan's awareness while she was scheduled for combat had thoroughly frightened Little Four. Although Little Four was also a member of the learning space, he was a support intelligence-entity responsible for helping the host to handle general affairs and had no control over the actions of the learning space. Still, he secretly made a resolution — he would make himself evolve further so that he could help Ling Lan bring the entire learning system under her control, so that the learning space would no longer be able to extract Ling Lan's consciousness as it liked.

This incident led both Ling Lan and Little Four to find their respective objectives for becoming stronger. The two of them no longer just went with the flow, but began working purposefully for the future.

By the time Ling Lan woke up, the arena battles were already all over — Ling Lan ended the ranking battles this time in second place. Ling Lan wasn't all too bothered by this, for Ling Lan's current goal was already not something this small little scout academy could satisfy. She wished even more for even more powerful people to fight.

Ever since Ling Lan came out from the learning space, she had already vaguely gained some insight on the existence of Dao; although she still couldn't borrow any of its energy, this was enough to imbue her body with a trace essence of Dao. In other words, if Ling Lan exposed just a little of this Dao essence, even a tenth grade student would be unable to resist its influence and would become unable to perform at full capacity. This was what made Dao so terrifying — it had the ability to limit and weaken the opponent.

Ling Lan believed that this wasn't all there was to Dao, but she had only just learned of it and was still unclear about what Dao truly was. At the same time, she was also unsure as to the limits of this essence. How strong did an opponent have to be before

this Dao essence would lose its effectiveness? All of this still awaited her exploration and research.

However, right now, Ling Lan wasn't ready to delve into this yet. Her entire concentration had been captured by the virtual world. That's right, Ling Lan and the others had finally been approved to enter the virtual space that could stand as a self-contained world of its own. The catch was that they still couldn't freely access and explore the whole virtual world of the Federation, but were restricted to hanging out in the virtual world of the Central Scout Academy.

In Ling Lan's words, this was obviously the 'newbie village' of the game world — only when one's level was high enough would one be able to go out into the big bad world out there.

Still, just this was enough on its own to thrill Ling Lan and the others. Before entering, they promised to meet up at the login point inside. Subsequently, they all went back to their own dorms, and lied down in their respective personal login pods.

The current virtual world was not like that of Ling Lan's previous world. The Federation was extremely strict with the management of the virtual world — the rules and regulations associated with it were no less than that of the real world, and was in fact significantly stricter. It should be known that over the millenniums, there had been over dozens of cases where the anarchy within the virtual world had spilled over to cause catastrophes in real world society. All these incidences caused the federal government to start taking the virtual world seriously, and to come up with various laws specifically targeted towards the regulation of the virtual world, which had also come to be known as humanity's second world.

Of course, the emergence of these regulations caused this second world to become very organised, which in turn led to this second world's rapid development, becoming unbelievably prosperous. It should be known that the Federation's mainframe used a human's brainwaves as the condition for logging in, and that every person's brainwaves were one of a kind, never-changing. Think about it. Every person could only have one ID and one image, no alternate accounts — if someone were caught committing some crime or breaking some law, they would be stripped of their right to log into the virtual world, and may even have to go to jail.

Current humans had already gotten used to existing within a virtual world, living a second life within this secondary world. This made people care very much about their

own IDs, taking care with their virtual selves, obeying the law. Of course, if you weren't afraid of the federal government stripping away your right to enter this second world, you could just cause as much trouble as you want.

Naturally, this wasn't foolproof — as technology continued to develop, humans were also continuing to evolve. Black-hat hackers who existed tens of thousands of years ago still existed tens of thousands of years later; but now they were called under one umbrella term — hacker.

This was not because hackers had become weaker, but rather, hackers as a collective had a higher entry point now. Only those whose minds had mutated in a way that allowed them to hide their true self within the virtual world could become a hacker.

Of course, among the hacker collective, there was still a side branch. That was a group of hackers who had the power to harm the electrical brainwaves of other humans, thus being able to commit murder within the virtual world — they were known by the people of the Federation as 'virtual spectres'! A scary existence capable of 'eating' the souls of humans.

Of course, all this had nothing to do with the present Ling Lan. It was impossible for Ling Lan, who could only hang around the virtual world of the Central Scout Academy, to bump into these fearsome beings; she was currently excitedly waiting for the connection from her login pod to go through.

Very quickly, Ling Lan had arrived at a large hall. It looked very familiar, actually being the exact replica of the Central Scout Academy's great hall. This caused Ling Lan to sweatdrop — who knew the academy would be so shameless as to set the login screen of the login pods to be the school's great hall.

Ling Lan looked left and right, but didn't notice any selection icons of any kind. However, in the near distance, a glimmering pillar of light could be seen slowly rotating.

Just as she was puzzling over the situation, Ling Lan suddenly heard a familiar voice ring out inside her mind, "Boss, do you want to change your name and appearance?"

"Little Four? How did you get here?" Hadn't she been brought here by her brainwaves? How had Little Four been brought along?

Little Four said smugly, "Who do you think I am? I am the god of the virtual world —

as long as there is a login signal, is there anywhere I can't go?" Before Ling Lan could ask any other questions, he asked again, "Boss, do you want to change your name and appearance?"

"I was just wondering why there wasn't the option to change my appearance... where is it? Quickly, tell me," said Ling Lan happily. This was her first time encountering the virtual world, so she was truly clueless how to go about doing things.

At these words, Little Four's expression turned scornful as he said, "Please Boss, what option to change your appearance? There's no such thing. Once the mainframe has confirmed your brainwaves, it'll automatically model your virtual self after your real world name and appearance — and this is also the only ID you can use to enter the virtual world."

Ling Lan said glumly, "Then there wouldn't be any sense of being in a virtual world! Isn't that just like reality?"

"Otherwise, how would the government here be able to control this virtual world?" Little Four wasn't at all surprised.

Ling Lan sighed deeply, feeling rather disillusioned, but she abruptly perked up and asked, "Little Four, what did you say earlier?"

Little Four cast a scornful look at Ling Lan, wondering if Ling Lan had gotten dementia so young. "I asked if Boss wanted to change your name and appearance."

Ling Lan clapped her hands together loudly, "Yes, that." Confused, she asked, "Little Four, if the mainframe generates name and appearance automatically after confirming my brainwaves, then how can you help me change my appearance and ID? And if you help me to change them, will I be stuck that way from now on?"

Little Four glared at Ling Lan, miffed that Ling Lan thought so little of him. He sniffed and said, "Am I that lame? Who do you think I am? God! I can change your brainwave information every time you login to the mainframe, and let you have a different appearance and ID every single time."

Ling Lan was moved, "Doesn't that mean that... I can have countless alternate accounts?"

Little Four said smugly, "That's right, but I recommend you start out with just your

real account and just one alternate account for now. Making too many would also be a waste."

"Why would I use an alternate account?" Ling Lan didn't think that she needed to do anything illegal or unconscionable, so she really didn't see the need for an alternate account.

Little Four looked at her as if she were an idiot. "Don't you want to go out and look around? With the appearance of an adult?"

Ling Lan blinked, startled, but was then overwhelmed with joy, "I can go out? Not just stay confined here in the Central Scout Academy?"

Unhappily, Little Four reminded her once more, "Boss, I already told you, I am a god-like existence. All the restrictions of the virtual world doesn't exist for me. Yup, it's like what you mentioned before — all tofu walls ¹."

Ling Lan felt dizzy with joy. She thought that she would still be trapped within the scout academy for another few years before she could come into contact with the greater world outside, but unexpectedly, because of Little Four, she could enter mainstream society right now, to get a true understanding of this world.

However, Ling Lan quickly calmed herself — six years of training within the learning space ensured that Ling Lan would never remain in an abnormal mental state for long. Once again, she refused Little Four's offer, because she needed to log in with her real ID and image for today, for this was the day she would be meeting up with her other companions in the virtual world for the first time.

Still, Ling Lan also told Little Four that the next time they had the chance, she would use a fake adult appearance to explore the outside world, to get a better understanding of this virtual world.

Under Little Four's nudging, Ling Lan walked to stand before that pillar of light, which was actually the teleportation tunnel to enter the virtual world. Ling Lan only hesitated for a moment before stepping resolutely into the light.

Ling Lan's entry point was a large plaza, which vaguely resembled the plaza of the Central Scout Academy, except it was bigger and wider. This was also the first entry point for all the students. Ling Lan could already see several familiar figures sitting on one of the long benches in the plaza not too far away, waiting for her to arrive.

Ling Lan walked over, smiling as she said, "You all sure move fast, all of you actually arriving before me."

Seated on the bench, Han Xuya pouted and said somewhat sulkily, "Boss, you are the last one. What took you so long? We've been waiting for almost half a day."

Beside Han Xuya, Luo Chao smiled shyly at Ling Lan, face filled with a quiet joy. For the past few days, because she was afraid that she would affect Ling Lan and the other boys during their fights, she had not gone to the hall to cheer them on, and this had caused Luo Chao's spirits to become a little low. When she saw Ling Lan once more, Luo Chao's mood immediately brightened immensely.

Qi Long, who had become slightly impatient due to the long wait, hurriedly said, "I've asked those NPCs ². There are a lot of missions here, which can give us cash, or even let us learn some combat moves."

Qi Long, with his passion for fighting, was completely helpless against this temptation, almost ready to abandon his boss and run off to seek the true path of combat.

Seeing how eager and restless everyone was, Ling Lan said, "Why don't we first exchange contact information, and then just go our own ways for a bit? We can just contact each other if we need any help."

"Okay!" Ling Lan's suggestion was unanimously approved; they all also believed that it was much more convenient to move separately. Just like that, each of them recorded down the others' contact information, and then they all went their separate ways.

Chapter 98

Legacy Mission?

After everyone had left, Little Four asked listlessly, *"Boss, what should we do now?"* Little Four, who had already been to the real virtual world, just couldn't muster up any enthusiasm for this enclosed little world.

"Let us just explore this newbie village a little..." In contrast, Ling Lan was very interested, for this was the very first time she was encountering the virtual world. She never expected that it would be so realistic — when she had first seen Qi Long and the others, she had almost thought that they were still in the real world.

Newbie village? What does that mean? Little Four was troubled; why couldn't he understand what his boss was saying?

However, for the sake of not cracking his image of 'smartest intelligence-entity', he didn't dare ask Ling Lan what it was, but instead secretly went to trawl through his own databases. Very quickly, in some random web novel, Little Four found the term, and when he took a look at the context of the term, he finally understood.

Little Four looked around at this closeted little world, compared it with the meaning of 'newbie village' in net-gaming, and found that his boss's description was just perfect. Once more, Little Four was awed by Ling Lan's deep knowledge — Boss sure is Boss, alright — able to use such concise and simple terms or sentences to describe a complicated thing in its entirety. Just look here... to ensure that those children who have yet to properly establish their values and world views were not led astray, the academy chose to protect them within an enclosure. Wasn't this exactly like the newbie villages which had been established in net-gaming 10000 years ago to protect the rights of new players?

Setting aside Little Four's current adulation towards Ling Lan which was surging like the waters of the Huang He ¹ and threatening to overflow... Ling Lan spent a whole day satisfying her curiosity, roughly exploring the entire area of this small enclosed world and getting a rough idea of the conditions within this enclosed city.

The city was very large, over a hundred times larger than the scout academy in reality.

By Ling Lan's estimations, it was impossible to learn all the nooks and crannies of this city without spending several years' time. This vastness was probably also for the sake of keeping the scout academy students at bay. After all, they had to stay put here in this patch of virtual reality for over 10 years while they remained in the academy — if they conquered this city within a few days, the students would definitely riot.

Time in the virtual world wasn't extended like Ling Lan imagined it to be, but moved at the same pace as real-world time. In other words, a day in the virtual world was equal to one real day.

Ling Lan wandered the city shops for a while and found that there weren't any strange or incomprehensible products — everything in the shops were items that also existed in reality. Then, when she asked, she found out that the things one bought in this virtual world were actually things being bought in reality. The moment you made an order and paid, the seller would send out the goods in the real world. Oh, right. A gentle reminder — things bought in the virtual world were non-refundable.

Of course, all sorts of learning halls were still the most common in the city. Within them were countless recordings of lessons for various courses — as long as you could complete certain preset missions, you would be able to receive one of the course videos for free. Of course, you could also choose to buy the lessons outright, but the cost in gold was enough to blind you... Hells, it was just too expensive.

If it were possible to transfer some credits in from the real world to exchange for currency, perhaps the students would not be so resentful, but unfortunately, to push the students to become independent quicker, the academy banned this trading function. Even more unreasonable was that every student who first entered wouldn't be given any money at all by the miserly academy, not even a single cent.

Want to buy something in the virtual world? That's fine, students. Please accept a mission and use your own two hands to build your fortune. All the NPCs will smilingly parrot this sentence, completely unmoved by the children's tantrums or wailing complaints.

Of course, the academy wasn't truly that heartless — they set up countless easy small missions within the virtual world. Naturally, the money one could earn from these missions wasn't much, but as long as one completed the mission, one could obtain the associated gold or redeem particular course instructions for free.

Rumour had it that there were also some legacy missions and ultimate combat moves available which caused the students eyes to burn with want, for these missions could let an average child rise meteorically overnight.

Of course, it wasn't easy to get this type of high-level mission, which was dependent on luck and circumstance. Moreover, even if you received this kind of mission, whether you could complete it was still uncertain — ultimate moves and legacies weren't that easy to obtain. These hidden details were still completely unknown to Ling Lan and the other new students who had just gained access to the virtual world. They could only begin from the small missions, and learn more about this 'second world' of humanity as they earned some pocket money.

As Ling Lan had the ultimate cheating device in the form of Little Four, she truly took to the virtual world like a fish to water. Facing the tens of thousands of content produced daily, Little Four carefully helped Ling Lan to pick out those missions which had the best cost-benefit ratio, allowing Ling Lan to accumulate gold at the fastest possible speed.

If necessary, Little Four could also directly bypass the lock on the virtual space and exchange credits for virtual currency to bring to Ling Lan. But this suggestion was immediately refused by Ling Lan. Ling Lan felt that she already had too much of an advantage presently because of Little Four. If she pushed it even more, she would really draw the wrath of the heavens and the grudge of the people... Ling Lan decided it would be better to keep a lower profile.

Of course, Ling Lan also refused Little Four because she still had one great advantage — the battle points she had gained in the ranking tournament were actually valid for changing into virtual currency. Ling Lan guessed that this was a reward mechanism put in place by the academy for the top talents, a covert form of encouragement. It could be expected that these exceptional children would be able to rely on this additional wealth from reality to pick up useful skills a step earlier, which was in line with the educational compass of the scout academy.

Just like that, Ling Lan busily passed a year between the scout academy and the virtual world. Within this period, she went through two more ranking tournaments, and for both times, she maintained her ranking at 4th place. The first time, she met Luo Lang in the semi-finals and chose to give up; while the second time, she met Qi Long in the

semi-finals and also chose to give up.

Don't blame Ling Lan for not having any fighting spirit — the difference between their strengths was just too wide. Asking Ling Lan to fight with them was really just like asking her to bully children, and there was really no benefit for either side. If not to guarantee that she would be able to get the best education and the best cultivation resources, Ling Lan would have no desire to fight at all.

This move also caused Ling Lan's reputation to only circulate within her grade; the upper grade seniors had still had some interest in Ling Lan at the beginning, but in the end, seeing Ling Lan consecutively get held back in the top 4, they gradually lost interest.

Ling Lan didn't care about any of this — the scout academy was just a place for her to learn, not a place for her to show off. Besides, she was very busy every day. She had lessons of the scout academy to learn, missions of the learning space to do, and she still had to make some time to research the Dao she wanted to walk. Of course, she also didn't forget to go complete several small missions in the virtual world with the highest returns as selected by Little Four every day.

On this day, Ling Lan logged in to the virtual world as usual to do her missions, but the moment she entered the virtual world, she was immediately bombarded by the countless alerts of her companions trying to contact her. She opened her flashing communicator, and found that Qi Long and the others were desperately trying to get hold of her.

"What's up?" Ling Lan was extremely curious — although the others would contact her every once in a while, they had never tried to contact her all at once like this before. Something big must have happened.

"Boss, where are you?" Qi Long's loud voice almost shattered Ling Lan's eardrums.

Ling Lan took a look at the familiar buildings around her and replied, "100 metres in front of the Electrodynamics building."

This time, Ling Lan was preparing to complete a particular Physics instructor's mission, and obtain instruction from said instructor in Physics topics. This wasn't in the form of a video, but was a personal one-on-one instruction. Furthermore, the instruction time awarded depended on how well the mission was completed. In other

words, the better Ling Lan did in the mission, the longer the instruction time she would get... This was also why she was willing to take on this mission.

"Hehehe... Boss really likes to joke... you can even measure out 100 metres just like that," said Qi Long amidst silly laughter. He had of course picked up on Ling Lan's dissatisfaction in her tone — it must be because of his overly loud volume earlier, but he was really just too excited and just couldn't control it.

"Don't accept that mission right now!" Qi Long suddenly thought of why Boss would be there, and hurried to stop him. Although the reward of that mission was tantalising, the mission contents were truly rage-inducing.

It was an examination mission, involving two solid hours of examination time. Of course, this wasn't the reason why the children would be driven wild — were there any dumb children who could enter the Central Scout Academy? They weren't at all afraid of tests. But, as a mission from a Physics instructor, why were the contents being tested from all subjects?! Even the smartest child would have one or two weaker subjects; thus, a majority of the children had all failed, with only a few all-rounded abnormals who managed to scrape by.

Among Qi Long and the others in the group, only Han Jijyun had managed to pass the test and receive a month of face-to-face instruction. This caused Han Jijyun's knowledge in Electrodynamics to improve in leaps and bounds — according to Han Jijyun, he didn't have to worry about anyone chasing up to him in this subject for the next 5 years now — it was truly fantastic.

"Reason?" asked Ling Lan calmly. She wasn't someone who would easily give up on her objective. Qi Long would have to give her a convincing reason, otherwise she would still choose to proceed with the mission.

"Come quickly to Mecha Street, a legacy mission has appeared here." Qi Long tried to lower his voice, but he couldn't hold back his excitement. He was so moved that he was on the verge of frenzy.

"Legacy mission? Really?" Ling Lan was startled by this news. Within this year, she had gradually come to understand some of the secrets of the virtual world, finding out that it was possible that there were some legacy missions here just waiting for the right person to come along and find it. Still, that was just a rumour after all — she had yet to hear of any student who actually obtained a legacy mission, but of course this didn't

include any students who may have obtained a legacy and then kept it a secret.

"Of course really! This mission has already been verified by the academy. Now everyone is preparing to go give it a try, but I hear from the students who've tried that the test of this mission is really weird. They all lost without knowing why, and was sent directly back out. But no one really believes what they say, and are all waiting to go try it once for themselves. Boss, that's a legacy mission. *Legacy*," Qi Long spilled all that he knew in a flood, shouting in his enthusiasm.

Qi Long just couldn't contain his excitement. The term 'legacy' could not be used lightly in this world — only those strong enough to reach the level of a imperial operator and beyond had the right to bequeath their life's learnings through a legacy method to a disciple. And a legacy mission was a type of test set by an imperial-level and above fighter to choose a disciple.

Chapter 99

Walk One's Own Path

"It can't be... aren't legacy missions the type that can only be stumbled upon by luck? Why would they have an open test this time?" Ling Lan's first reflex was to think that this was a joke, but then, considering Qi Long's straightforward personality, he would never joke about something as major as this. So, she started asking for more information.

"I'm not sure about that myself. Maybe the one who set the legacy mission just likes to use this kind of wide-scale elimination method to choose a disciple. Still, I like it," said Qi Long, grinning happily. He felt that he would have very little luck with those legacies which depended on chance, so he was ecstatic to see this type of publicly accessible legacy mission. Plus, he felt that this sort of legacy was fairer.

Qi Long would think this way due to his personality — being someone who favoured the direct approach, just looking at the convoluted twists and turns of some things gave him a headache.

"So it's a sea-selection ¹!" Ling Lan exclaimed in realisation. Of course, Ling Lan's words made Qi Long on the other end of the communicator gasp out in repeated admiration once more, for he felt that this descriptor was truly perfect for the situation.

The skin on Ling Lan's face had gotten exceptionally thick by now, having gotten used to taking credit for all those net-terminology or modern slang so popular in her previous world. Thus, she just calmly took it in stride and told Qi Long that she would hurry over immediately.

Although Ling Lan wasn't particularly keen about this public legacy mission, this was still Ling Lan's first encounter with a so-called legacy mission after all. She was very curious, and so decided to hold off on her current mission and go take a look at Qi Long's area first.

Little Four fully supported this plan; he was very annoyed at himself for overlooking this legacy mission, and so decided that he would analyse this sort of legacy mission

closely to avoid missing them in the future. He would make sure to find all the legacy missions and present them to his boss... It had to be said that Little Four was really very greedy, actually planning to round up all the legacy missions within the virtual network. Luckily Ling Lan didn't notice what Little Four was thinking right now, otherwise she would certainly be rendered speechless — legacies weren't like the Chinese cabbages they could eat every day!

As its name implied, Mecha Street was a street filled with mecha shops. However, in the newbie village, er... no, the enclosed city of the scout academy, what the shops sold were all kinds of mecha figurines of different sizes, readily available for the students to peruse to better understand this world's strongest solo weaponry. Whether they were male or female, as long as they had money, they would definitely buy one of the mecha models they liked.

The mecha models were very realistic — the materials used to make them were actually of the same alloy type as real mecha. That said, real mecha were made with the highest grade materials, while the models were made with secondary level materials, along with some miscellaneous junk materials. Still, every part of the mecha was made perfectly, just like on a real mecha. All movable and removable parts worked exactly like a real mecha, and even the controls and operational instruments within the mecha's cockpit were all present and accounted for. This made them perfect for letting the children learn about the internal structure of mecha and some of its basic operations.

The moment Ling Lan arrived at Mecha Street, she could see countless students surging in a particular direction. So, without even having to ask Qi Long for directions, Ling Lan knew exactly where she should go. It was very likely that these students had all rushed over after hearing the news.

Moving with the crowd, Ling Lan finally arrived at her destination. Seeing the human blockade spanning 100 metres long, Ling Lan couldn't help but frown deeply. Just at a glance, there were probably about almost ten thousand students gathered here.

Ling Lan could only contact Qi Long once again to find out where they were. Because they had arrived early, they were now stuck about 60 to 70 metres to the front. They had never expected that within a few short minutes, over ten thousand students would have rushed over. Now, they were stuck with no way to move forward or backward,

and so could only stay put and wait for their turn to take the test.

Seeing this, Ling Lan decisively turned around, prepared to go back to her earlier mission. So many people... who knows when it'll be before it's her turn? Ling Lan didn't have that much time to waste; in fact, her time had been tight to start with.

But Little Four stopped her, asking her to wait a while, before disappearing in a hurry.

Ling Lan thought of Little Four's abilities and so decided to be patient and wait. However, she didn't like to be surrounded by people, so Ling Lan looked around to her left and right...

The shops on mecha street were basically all three-storey buildings, with the lowest level being taller than the floors of a regular building by about a half-storey because the model mecha on the first floor were all very big and tall, some even reaching a height of up to three metres high. These models could allow a person to sit in the mecha's cockpit to experience first-hand how it really felt to operate one, but of course, the price of this type of mecha wasn't cheap. Without external financial support, relying solely on the students' own efforts to gather money, it would be impossible to purchase these mecha without investing up to seven or eight years of time. Of course, if Ling Lan wanted, with Little Four's assistance, she would be able to purchase it after two years at max.

The second storey of the shops were where the well-crafted miniature model mecha were displayed, available for perusal and purchase by students who liked collecting them. Meanwhile, the third storey was where the cashier was located, and where one could go to pre-order some model mecha. After all, some mecha were extremely expensive, so the shops didn't want to tie up too much of their cash flow in stock.

Every mecha seller's shopfront was decorated uniquely and with personal flair — there were those which drew inspiration from sci-fi and fantasy, while others were simple, some traditional, and even more in line with modern trends... Ling Lan's attention had been drawn by a shop roughly three metres in front of her. A canvas sign full of vintage flavour hung from its walls, and a string of small red lanterns trailed down from the roof of the third storey.

Ling Lan's eyes flashed; perhaps she could make use of this.

Before she could be surrounded by people, Ling Lan took advantage of the little space

she had around her to take two small quick steps, and then, with a spring of her toes, she leapt off the ground.

"Owie, who stepped on my head?!" A small student whose attention had been absorbed by the front suddenly felt someone stepping on his head. He quickly looked up and saw a small nimble figure flying by.

"Someone is jumping on top!" Quite a few other people had also noticed Ling Lan's actions, and they all began making a racket.

Ling Lan could be seen flying to land on the side of the wall of the shop, where she tugged on the string of lanterns with one hand to send herself flying upwards once again. Ling Lan's body was extremely agile; she managed to flip up onto the roof in an instant like a nimble monkey.

"F*ck, so that's also a way of doing things." Those observing abruptly realised that it wasn't absolutely necessary to walk on the ground to move to the front. Those with fast reflexes immediately copied Ling Lan and began climbing up the shop. However, it wasn't long before everyone else gathered their wits and leapt towards that string of lanterns. The result was tragic but predictable — how could this small string of lanterns bear the weight of so many people? — it snapped from the middle, causing many of the students on the lower half to fall down.

It would have been fine if things ended there, but at that moment, everyone was still rushing towards that shop, thus resulting in a disastrous stampede. It was said later that countless students had been evicted right out of the virtual world because of this stampede incident. When those students tried logging in once more, they were warned that their virtual bodies had been destroyed by unbearable pressure, and that they would have to wait till three days later before they could log in again.

This caused the students to beat their chests in frustration, full of bitter regret. If they had known this would be the outcome... why did they have to try and follow that despicable person's shortcut? If they had just obediently kept their place in line, they were likely to have gotten their turn after just a full day and night of waiting.

Ling Lan had no idea that her spontaneous movements had actually sparked such a tragedy within the virtual world. She sped over the rooftops, and it wasn't long before she saw Qi Long and the others hemmed in on all sides by people. One, two, three, four, five... nine — yup, every one of them was there, all stuck within the crowd.

Making a direct call to Qi Long's communicator, Ling Lan said smugly, "Lil' boy Qi Long, I see you ~" It was rare that she had the urge to tease them. Ling Lan sat on the edge of a rooftop and looked down at her friends peering around trying to find her when they heard the news.

"Boss, where are you? Why can't I see you?" Qi Long was very surprised. He was barricaded on all sides, stuck, so how in the world had Boss come to find them from over 100 metres away?

Han Jijyun lowered his head in thought, when suddenly an idea popped into his head. He looked up and immediately saw Ling Lan grinning and waving at them.

What an intelligent child, being able to find the key point so quickly. Ling Lan confirmed once more that Han Jijyun was very smart; as long as he was given a tiny hint, he could immediately hone in on the most important points.

Under Han Jijyun's prompting, Qi Long and the others also looked up to see Ling Lan smirking at them. With some frustration, Qi Long said, "Now why didn't I think of that?" Since this virtual world was known to be almost 100% realistic, of course it would be possible to also travel over the rooftops. Unfortunately, it was already too late now. They were squeezed within the crowd, unable to find any space to sprint towards a shop wall.

In the end, they could only regretfully let Ling Lan help them to go ahead and find out about the contents of the mission. Ling Lan naturally did not object. She waved a casual farewell to them and then disappeared.

Han Jijyun sighed and said, "Boss Ling Lan is truly the boss, always able to think of things we'd never think of. Compared to him, we're just too weak." Rather than martial prowess, Han Jijyun was more admiring of Ling Lan's intellect — this was a natural focal point for intelligent people.

Qi Long nodded in agreement, and said somewhat dejectedly, "Yeah, we all learned combat arts together, but in the end, while we can still only use them as sparring stances, Boss can apply them as killing tools already."

Qi Long would still pester Ling Lan to spar with him every once in a while, and Ling Lan would accept if she was in a good mood. Both of them would only use those common combat arts taught by the school during those spars. However, for the exact

same move, while Qi Long was still just replicating it as taught, Ling Lan was already simplifying it and absorbing it, making it truly part of her own personal combat arts.

Those observing from the side-lines may not have been able to see the situation clearly, but Qi Long who was in the thick of it knew very well that Ling Lan was truly very scary. His combat ability had already surpassed them by too much. At times, he would even get the illusion that the pressure Ling Lan exerted was as formidable as his father's.

Because every time they crossed moves, Ling Lan would always pull back right before he would hit his fatal spots. To an outsider, it would seem as if they were fighting evenly, but in fact, Ling Lan was just holding back. Sometimes, his moves even had a trace of mentoring embedded within them, pushing Qi Long's understanding of how to fight better.

However, even though Ling Lan was already holding back that much, Qi Long could still feel the force of the wind behind Ling Lan's fists. It scraped over his body so sharply that it felt as if it could split his skin — this force was a terrifying one, and he knew he would have no chance of surviving even just one hit. It would be a total GAME OVER.

This truly displayed the resilience of Qi Long's personality. He did not become sullen and depressed in the face of Ling Lan's fearsome strength, but instead respected Ling Lan even more. At the same time, he also pushed himself to train harder, refusing to allow himself to be too much weaker than the boss he had acknowledged. This, was his pride as a follower.

Chapter 100

The Case of the Glass Window!

It wasn't long before Ling Lan arrived at the mission location. Frankly, if you didn't look closely, it would be impossible to see where it was, because the entire Mecha Street was filled with people. The ground wasn't visible no matter which end you looked at. However, Ling Lan's eyes were sharp. She noticed that at the entrance of one particular shop, the children were lined up and entering one at a time, and so she knew she had found the right place.

Ling Lan did not choose to jump down, for she suspected that if she tried to cut the line right then, it would definitely incite the rage of the crowd. If that happened, no matter how adept she was at fighting, she would still be beaten up by all the students like a rat crossing the street ¹. So she laid flat on the roof, and peeked over the eaves to look down. As she expected, the third storey had windows.

That being so, she positioned herself, and then, hanging down with her feet hooked on the eaves, she managed to touch the windows of the third storey. Right now, Ling Lan only hoped that the glass wouldn't be anything insane like bulletproof glass or tempered glass.

She tapped on the panes lightly, and the glass produced a crisp and clear sound — it should just be regular glass. Ling Lan decisively clenched her fist and threw a heavy punch. A crisp 'bang!' rang out, and there was now a hole in the glass. Ling Lan continued to rain several more blows at the window until all the glass had been shattered.

Ling Lan's savage method was noticed by the students below, and a furor broke out among the students waiting on the street. They had never even considered such a violent way of entering a shophouse. Quite a few of the students were mentally chiding themselves — if they had only known of this method earlier, then they wouldn't have had to wait so patiently in line for so long.

Ling Lan paid no mind to the envy-jealousy-hate of the students below. She loosened the grip of her legs, both hands grabbing on tightly to the window frame, and nimbly flipped herself from outside the window into the shop.

But when Ling Lan got a better look at the scene inside the shop, she was instantly depressed. Because, of all the places she could enter from, she had coincidentally entered the room where the portal to the test was located. As a result, she was immediately caught red-handed by the instructors posted there to maintain order.

An elderly instructor with a white beard pointed a trembling finger at her and raged, "Who are you? From which grade? How can you be so disrespectful?!" Ling Lan was wearing the red uniform specific to the special classes, so it went without saying that he was one of those prideful princes. The only question was which grade he was from.

Ling Lan swiftly took a look around the room, and found that other than the one angry old teacher in front of her, the other teachers, especially those of the younger generation, weren't as angry as she would have expected. Some were even smiling slightly with a trace of approval in their gazes.

Eh? This action of hers was obviously going against the established order of things, and may even create chaos and confusion — why weren't the instructors offended? Why would they even *approve* ? Ling Lan abruptly remembered that this was a world where the strongest survive, where everything was decided through strength. Was intelligence also considered a type of strength? Did the academy openly announce this legacy mission, but never really intended for the children to enter the test under normal pathways? So, this method of hers which would seem so rebellious and off the beaten track in her previous world... was actually considered a display of intelligence here?

Ling Lan did not linger on the idea, letting it sweep by without thinking any more of it. This was because she needed to respond properly to the instructor; the academy placed top priority in respecting one's teachers and honouring the truth, and Ling Lan had no intentions of flouting this tradition.

"Good day, teacher. I am Ling Lan of grade 2 Class-A." Ling Lan's calm self-introduction caused some of the teachers to break out into laughter. This child showed no hint of shame for being caught doing something wrong — his expression was closer to that of an innocent babe's.

"Even if you are a child from Class-A, one of the most excellent of students within the academy, I will submit a complaint to the school administration on your horrible behaviour and make them take away your right to be in Class-A." Ling Lan's easy attitude without any sign of repentance had thoroughly enraged the already angry old

teacher.

The old teacher's words made the younger teachers around him smile bitterly, silently shaking their heads. This elderly teacher was infamous within the academy for being mule-headed. Right was right, wrong was wrong, no ifs and buts about it — he was a stubborn old fogey who would show no mercy. It was for this very reason that the academy administration had put him in charge of keeping order here. They were hoping he would be able to frighten some of the academy's more unruly students with his sternness and keep them in check. Who knew that before he could have a chance to frighten those naughty students, he would already clash with an intelligent child with unorthodox thinking?

The younger instructors were all glum — if this old teacher weren't here, they would have just let Ling Lan go ahead and take the test already! It couldn't be helped. They just really liked this sort of student who was willing to leap out of the box, and who was filled with limitless potential.

Ling Lan was also extremely troubled. She kneaded her forehead, thinking about how she could solve this problem. It wasn't that she was really afraid that the elderly teacher would complain, but rather, she felt that it would be wrong to make this old man with a head full of white hair angry.

After a beat of silence, Ling Lan opened her mouth to ask, "May I know who is the owner of this shop?"

A young man was sitting on a sofa by the side talking quietly with another young man in military uniform as they watched events unfold. Hearing the question of the child who broke the window, he hurriedly raised his hand and said, "That's me. I'm over here." With a smile on his face, he waited with interest to see what Ling Lan would do next.

Seeing the young man's intrigued expression, Ling Lan's heart settled. With a slight bow of her head, she said sincerely, "I'm sorry I broke your shop's window pane! May I know how much it would cost to install a new one? I will pay for it."

"It's fine, it's fine, it's just a small glass pane," said the young man, still smiling, casually refusing Ling Lan's offer.

But Ling Lan insisted, "I did it, so I will take responsibility. The academy has taught us

before that we should not run away from our responsibilities."

Ling Lan's words caused all the teachers present to nod their heads silently — even the angered elderly instructor was stroking his white beard in gratification, and the harsh expression on his face gentled considerably.

An impressive child! A sharp glint flashed through the eyes of the young soldier beside the young man. Defusing the elderly instructor's rage with just a few short sentences; he could already predict that this case would end peacefully.

"Haha, what if this piece of glass is very expensive? I know well that you scout academy students don't have much money here," said the young man with a mischievous smirk. It seemed like the young man just wanted to mess around with Ling Lan on purpose. At the same time, he was subtly reminding Ling Lan that she shouldn't make promises so quickly before she had all the information.

With a shake of her wrist, Ling Lan sent the small item in her hand flying through the air straight towards the young man. This movement was extremely sudden, but the young man was not at all flustered. He calmly reached out his right hand and easily caught the item.

This sharp and clean catch caused Ling Lan's brows to lift up slightly; looks like the owner of this shop was more than he seemed. Ling Lan kept her surprise lidded as a smirk appeared on her face. "This is a fragment of that glass of yours. It would be easy enough to find a device to assess its components. We students of the scout academy are protected by the scout academy... I believe that Big Brother wouldn't want to offend the scout academy, right?"

Every student who studied at the scout academy would receive the academy's protection. Any adult who tried to cheat or deceive the students would certainly draw the frenzied vengeance of the scout academy.

The way Ling Lan looked at the young man, just as if he were an idiot, made the young soldier beside him chuckle, while the young man couldn't help but hide his face behind a hand, speechless. He just hadn't been able to stop himself from teasing this cute little boy a little — did the boy have to retaliate so fiercely? Actually being looked down upon by a 7 year old child... Boo hoo hoo, he didn't want to live anymore.

The elderly instructor's face, which had already gentled completely by this time,

actually smiled a little at this speech of Ling Lan's, nodding all the while. So this child wasn't an unruly and naughty child — he was very clear on what was right and wrong in the bigger picture, and was also a responsible child. He really wasn't a bad child at all... looks like he couldn't treat him too harshly now, to avoid hurting the child's development...

Unknowingly, the elderly instructor's thoughts had been changed by Ling Lan's performance.

"Alright, just giving me 500 Federation virtual coins will do." The young man could only give an amount that was lower than the market rate by 30%. Ling Lan naturally didn't refuse the other's kind intentions and stupidly insist on paying the so-called correct price just to prove how noble she was.

That done, Ling Lan packed away her contempt, her expression turning earnest as she thanked the young man. This caused the young man's spirits to brighten instantly, and he once again felt like this child before him was just too adorable.

Boo hoo hoo, he must definitely propose to his girlfriend as soon as possible so they could consummate their marriage and have a plump little baby next year as cute as this child before him...

Ling Lan swiftly transferred the requested gold coins to the young man, and the case of the broken window was settled just like that. Then, she walked over to stand in front of the elderly instructor and said seriously, "Thank you, teacher, for your guidance."

These words of Ling Lan finally moved the old instructor. The children these days were all very rebellious, and would usually hold a grudge against their teachers when rebuked, rather than be grateful for it. Yet, the elderly instructor could see very clearly that Ling Lan was sincere when she thanked him. Ling Lan's current demeanour made the old instructor unable to maintain his initial sternness, so he only said gruffly, "Remember, there's no next time."

Eh?! Was this still that merciless stubborn old fogey they all knew? All of the other instructors were extremely surprised that the elderly instructor would let Ling Lan off so easily ². They had initially thought that the elderly instructor would personally go all the way to the disciplinary department to make a complaint. Who would have guessed that the end of the matter would be this 'all thunder but no rain' type of result?

A smile hung on the corners of the young soldier's lips as he looked at Ling Lan's face which was dripping with sincerity. What a perfect finishing blow! Who knew that after leaving the academy for over a decade, another aberrantly exceptional child would appear... Lin Lan... Lin ³? Linn ⁴? Ling ⁵? The child's surname and that of the prodigy of his time actually sounded the same. What a coincidence... could it be that it was the same Ling?

At this thought, the young soldier's expression dimmed. When he looked at Ling Lan once more, his gaze carried a trace of prayer, hoping that this stunningly intelligent child would be able to grow up safely. He hoped that the child would not end up like his old classmate, who had lost his wings to some sinister plot eight years ago before he could fully shine his brightest...

The old instructor ignored the shock on the other instructors' faces. He scoffed in his heart: *"Did you all really think I was senile and blinded by old age? That I wouldn't be able to see this child's brilliance? Being hard on him would have just been to prevent him from walking down the wrong path due to his overwhelming intellect. But this child really handled this matter well. He completely captured my weak points, making me unable to continue being stern. Oh, how perfectly he did it..."*

A trace of worry appeared on the elderly instructor's face, along with some quiet satisfaction; his feelings were mixed. This child would either grow up to become a hero, or an outlaw — who knew what path he would choose in the future...

Seeing that the case of the broken window had been settled favourably, the teacher in charge of calling the students to enter the test did not continue to call on the next student. Instead, he indicated for Ling Lan to come over and gave him some time to prepare as he waited to be transported through the portal for the test.



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